



# THE TRUE ADVENTURES OF



## SNOW WHITE

*Because Happily Ever After Is Overrated*


LINDA BETH RICHARDSON

ILLUSTRATED BY: JAN MICHAEL VINCENT SY



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Adventures  
of Snow White**



# The True Adventures of Snow White

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*Because Happily Ever After Is Overrated*

*Happy Reading!*

*Linda Richardson*

*5-24-11*

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Dedicated in loving memory to the two people who taught me to  
value reading and to keep a story funny

Mama

Hazel Elizabeth Baker Richardson

1920–2010

Daddy

Rupert Samuel Richardson

1922–2008





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# CHAPTER 1

---

So many people are familiar with the widely circulated story of Snow White that there would likely be a general outcry of dismay and disdain if this narrative ever became public, but I am thinking of the future; my children, if I ever get to have some, have a right to know the truth. If they choose to fill in the parts I am leaving out with their own lurid imaginations, that is not my problem. This is not going to be the story of the “happily ever after” portion of the tale, so most of those parts won’t factor in anyway.

The story of my genesis is actually fairly accurate in the commonly told story. My father was—and still is—the king of a moderate-sized realm that had best remain nameless, in case this volume ever falls into hands other than those for which it is intended. He married my mother when she was seventeen, and in the fullness of time, she longed for a child to fill her empty arms. Naturally my father hoped the child would be a boy, but my mother, a feminine woman who loved to sew beautiful clothes, wanted a daughter to be her real-life little doll to be dressed in the finest fabrics and the most beautiful patterns she could devise. As the story goes, she pricked her finger one day while sewing and yearning for said daughter, and a single drop of blood fell onto the black windowsill, into the white snow. The mingled colors inspired her to voice a wish for a daughter “with skin as white as snow, hair as black as ebony, and lips as red as blood.”

As it happened, a passing fairy carried this news to the chief fairy of the local bevy, or whatever they call their hives, and he was moved to grant my mother's wish. Nine months later, on the first stroke of noon, I was born to the great rejoicing of the court and all the people of the kingdom. My father was a little disappointed not to have a son to carry on the family line and his own name. In fact, he had been so sure of having a son that he had never considered what to name a girl child, so he let my mother call me Snow White instead of anything sensible like Katherine or Elizabeth or even Anna, which, with another six names for good measure, made up the "official" name with which I was christened after all the ladies in waiting had a chance to make suggestions and the Privy Council had approved the long string of names honoring everyone from my grandmothers to a great-aunt's favorite cat. But the damage had been done; Snow White I was and remained. Actually, it could have been worse. I mean, the cat's name was Moufflette, and my grandmothers were Lucretia (no, *not* Borgia!) and Ermintrude.

The story goes that the young princess grew fair and beautiful as her birth promised, and everyone was happy all the days of yore. The story is relatively accurate, except that my days were spent being dressed up in all those beautiful frocks my mother created for her little real-life doll. I got so used to being stuck full of pins that I was practically impervious to the bruises, scrapes, and scratches I acquired every time I broke free from the dressing room and made it to the gardens and especially the orchards where I played with the other noble children who resided in the castle. To my mother's great dismay, almost all of these happened to be the royal pages and younger squires, all of whom were, of course, boys. It was like having a dozen brothers who loved to tempt me into running footraces, riding bareback and astride, digging for fishing worms, and climbing every tree in the orchard. It is no wonder my mother had to keep sewing new garments for me. They didn't last long. As for my ebony locks—well, the less said of that tangled mop, the better. The daily



ritual of a hundred strokes with the brush was fraught with pain because besides being full of twigs and burrs, that mess was also as thick as fur on a cat and curly besides.

Nothing more momentous than what I have described happened until my mother died. She died of pneumonia, which she caught by sitting beside an open window in the winter. Maybe she was hoping to prick her finger again and wish for a son to please my father! She was ready for me to begin acting like a lady because, at nearly twelve, I had reached a “marriageable age,” and she was despairing of ever finding a husband for me. As I said, I had grown up among boys; the experience had ruined me. I could outrun, outclimb, and outwrestle any of the boys in the castle, and they all knew it. None of the suitable noble candidates who had paraded through the castle in the past five years or so was ever likely to ask for my fair hand in marriage—which suited me fine but worried my mother tremendously.

My mother’s death clearly was the first tragic loss in my life. What child who has known a mother’s love for all his or her life could say less? My world changed from happy and secure to uncertain and flawed in the course of a day. The worst part was my father’s sorrow. He had been lucky enough to really love the girl his father picked for him to marry, and when she died, he was more lost than anyone I have ever known or hope to know. He had been married virtually all his life (he had been betrothed at the age of 15), and he really did not know how to function without a queen at his side. Did I say his sorrow was the worst part? Well, one thing was even worse: All the single noble ladies who came for the state funeral and wept over me and my poor father were shedding crocodile tears. They were all vying to take her place before the flowers on the grave wilted.

I suppose Father could have married a worse queen, but I hate to imagine what that one might have been like. Lady Caledonia was bad enough. Having loved my mother with all his being, my father did not expect a second marriage to duplicate the emotion of the first. Some people have called old Callie a witch, but I would substitute

another letter for that w and leave it at that. Most people say she bewitched him, but that is not accurate. Not expecting to find love again, Father pragmatically married for political alliance with a strong country, which could have been either a dangerous enemy or a strong support in case of war. He hardly even spoke with the woman before they were married, one year to the day after my mother's interment.

Since old Callie figures heavily in the events of my own life, I need to give the readers of this tale a rather detailed description. Caledonia was at the time twenty years old, only a few years my senior. She was attractive in the way a hawk is beautiful. She had a high forehead and small eyes that were almost but not quite yellow. People who wanted to flatter her called them amber. Her nose was long and straight, and her mouth had full lips that were most often set in a pout. Her hair was red, really red, and fell to her waist in long ripples when let loose, and she was tall, really tall. She topped my father by a good two inches even without the high heels that had become popular at court that year. She was also as imperious with her servants as any wife of Caesar ever dared to be.

Our mutual antipathy was instantaneous from the moment we laid eyes on one another.

To be fair, I would have hated any stepmother who entered the castle and tried to take my mother's place. I was an adolescent, after all, and despite my mother's mania about dressing me up and turning me into a proper lady in order to catch myself a good husband, I adored her and missed her more than I can say. I wasn't too happy about Father marrying again, but if Caledonia had just left me alone, I suppose we could have made the best of things. Unfortunately, she did not leave me alone but insisted on bringing along her own old governess to "take me in hand." The old governess was undoubtedly a witch as well as a number of other nouns I will not write down, as they would shock a casual reader and are not words I want my hypothetical children to realize I ever used or even knew. I fully intend to clean up my own language long before said children ever arrive on

the scene. They will undoubtedly learn enough profanity from their father to offer them a wide choice of nouns to fill in above.

Between them, Caledonia and Lady Wilfride made my life ever more miserable. Despite my long-standing battle with my mother over the need to keep my clothes somewhat neater than I did, I could not complain about my garments not being nice or comfortable. My mother had sewn beautifully and had taught me enough to keep my clothes from deteriorating into rags. I was accustomed to having beautiful clothes in good condition. By the age of thirteen, I had begun to fill out into a woman's shape, and I had reached nearly my full height. With some minor alterations, I was able to wear my mother's clothes, and my father was quite willing to let me do so, since the fabrics and trims for those dresses had been expensive, and my father likes to get his money's worth out of anything he buys. Caledonia was not exactly bony, but she was not well rounded by any stretch of the imagination. She could not wear my mother's clothes, for which I was grateful, because she was too tall. But she certainly did not want *me* to have them, because she was the queen and did not want anyone to have clothes more beautiful than her own. Her trousseau was well made but not exceptionally attractive because the colors were all wrong, and the popular wide skirts and low-cut bodices did not go well with her height and thinness. By contrast, I am short and already at thirteen had the beginnings of an "hour-glass" figure. The fact that I looked quite good in the popular style infuriated her, and she was determined I should not outshine her. She used my untidiness one day after I had been riding with some of the boys as an excuse to dress me in the roughest, ugliest garments she could find.

"Until you learn to keep yourself neat, you will wear only coarse linen!" she declared. I was given no chance to point out that being thrown by a horse frequently results in getting one's riding habit dirty and even torn. Of course, it would have done no good if I had gotten a chance to say it. She hated horses (as well as dogs, cats, and every other animal) and never went riding at all. (This was a mistake on her

part on which I did not bother to enlighten her; my father was an expert equestrian and had often taken long rides with my mother to secluded and very romantic spots.)

I could go on complaining about Caledonia and Lady Wilfride for pages and pages, but all those complaints make for boring reading and show me to be quite immature myself. I was the quintessential adolescent in those days, so I brought some of the consequences on myself. Of course, I would never have admitted that then. Remembering my own demeanor at that time is enough to make me squirm. I gloomed around the castle in my dull brown and gray robes and glowered at Caledonia, Lady Wilfride, and everyone else who came within speaking distance. My temperament was not improved by worry over my father, who at that time was leading troops in support of Caledonia's brother in an ongoing battle over his northern border. On campaign for two years running, he was so tired when he did come home that I kept my mouth shut and just glowered all the more at the queen. If he had not married her, he would not be involved in the war at all.

The other part of the equation that added to my misery in those years was Lady Wilfride, my governess. She was irritating in an entirely different way than Caledonia. She was nasty to me, but then she was nasty to everyone. She whined about the food, the rooms, and the servants' behavior. She was a scrawny little woman whose face was set in a permanent scowl, and her habitually black clothing made her look like an underfed and very angry crow.

I said before that Wilfride was a witch, and by her own admission, she liked to think she was. She wasn't a very good witch, because the potions she brewed for dear Caledonia never made her hair turn auburn instead of scarlet red, and she never did acquire the curves needed to fill out the low bodices of her gowns. She also never conceived the child she so desperately wanted to give my father. Wilfride never stopped trying, though. Her room smelled like a sewer and was so full of arcane and disgusting potion ingredients that



the housekeeper finally resorted to making the maids draw straws to see who had to go inside. Whenever I saw one of the maids in tears, I knew she had drawn the short straw for the day.

Regarding witches and the practice of magic, I feel I must address the famous (or infamous) “magic mirror” from the well-known version of the story. Contrary to popular belief, there never was a mirror or any other inanimate object making assertions that “Snow White is the fairest in the land.” What a laugh! If Caledonia had ever bought a mirror that spouted such nonsense about me, she would have demanded her money back from the charlatan who sold it to her, and quite rightly, too. So far as I know, the only witch or magician of any sort old Callie ever consulted was Lady Wilfride, and as I said, she was obsessed with potions.

The only positive aspect of having Lady Wilfride for a governess was that she virtually ignored me, except to yell at me about the state of my hair, my room, and my behavior. She was supposed to be supervising my education, but her preoccupation with her noxious potions prevented her from interfering very often. She gave me a list of books and sent me to the library to read them. Periodically, she would quiz me on one or another of them in an abstract sort of way. I had no trouble passing her quizzes; I have always been able to memorize poems and songs, and I could quote them to her at length. Actually, I rather enjoyed reading those books on courtly love. I was supposed to be learning what to expect of the young men who would vie for my hand in marriage. The tales of chivalrous deeds were fairly clean of the actual gore and pain of real battles; not one of those poetic youths was ever trampled by horses or lost an arm or leg or died of gangrene the way real men in real wars do. The ladies in the tales bored me to tears working on their endless tapestries. The men in their shining armor and silken cloaks, their eyes “alight with pure, chaste love,” were the funniest part. I tried really hard to imagine any of the boys I had run and played with bowing over my hand and murmuring about golden bowers and sweet summer flowers. I have

a really good imagination but not that good. A castle is really a whole little closed world, but it is not that much different from any other society. Having heard my father's vassals all my life, I knew the subjects on which they discoursed at all were hounds, horses, hawks, swordplay, and what is most delicately referred to as "wenching." I'd seen a few men (and a few women too) with the "light of love" in their eyes, and on the whole, I preferred to anticipate the real thing rather than the insipid, artificial dialogues the books tried to make of love.

By the time I was fifteen, Caledonia was tired of my glowering at her, and she was ready to be rid of me. The tale goes that she called a huntsman to take me deep into the forest and slay me while my father was away. The truth is I got wind of her plans to marry me to her cousin Prince Hubert. Prince Hubert was far from my notion of a suitable husband, so I made some plans of my own not to be home when he arrived on the scene. I packed a bag and stole down the servants' stairs, went through the kitchen to pack a few meals of food into another bag, and crept through the kitchen gardens toward the stables.

Getting into the stables and out of the castle grounds presented no serious problems. With my father off campaigning, security was supposed to be increased, but the stablemen who were left were those least needed to care for the battle steeds, and the porter at the postern gate drank ale from dark until about midnight, then slept it off until he was relieved at daybreak. By the time anyone who might notice my absence was stirring, I was already deep into the Dark Forest on a road that had fallen into disuse since the new east-west highway had been finished during my grandfather's reign. I learned later that Caledonia, as a matter of form, sent guardsmen (not huntsmen) to look for me, but I doubt that she was really hoping they would bring me back. She hadn't got me married off, but she was rid of me, and that was good enough for her.

## CHAPTER 2

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I was out of the castle and through the town that surrounds it a good half hour before dawn, and in another few minutes, I reached the edge of the trees. Tales of the frightful denizens of the Dark Forest abound, and I have to admit to some qualms once the track had twisted and turned so that I could no longer look back and see the lights of the castle behind me. I had previously entered only the edge of the Dark Forest, never alone, and only in full daylight; even then it was an eerie place, far too silent and far too vast to make anyone used to living outside it comfortable. With just pale, predawn moonlight to show me a dim trail, it was uncanny and more than a little frightening. I slowed my horse to a walk and hoped daylight would come soon and relieve at least part of the feeling I had of being watched by unseen and unfriendly eyes.

The track was in even worse repair than I remembered from the last time I had been there. Fallen limbs littered the old highway, and heavy layers of evergreen needles blanketed the ground to a sameness of both trail and trackless forest. The only sure way to keep to the trail was to follow the ancient stone pillars that marked the way, but many of those have been broken or covered by dead falls.

My plan was to strike south as soon as I could and follow a winding route to my uncle's capital. I did not know him well, having met him exactly twice. I had been very young when we traveled to his

coronation, and I had been distraught and unreceptive when he came to my mother's funeral. Still, he was family, and I expected he would take me in and let me stay until my father came to fetch me personally. Finding the road that ran south into the mountains presented a challenge. I have a good head for geography, but the trackless forest where I could hardly ever see the sky, much less the sun, made the task of finding any direction difficult if not impossible.

The Dark Forest is not completely dark in the daylight, and most of the hideous creatures that live there are more scared of people than we are of them. The Dark Forest is not even devoid of people. After all, the track I was following used to be a major highway, and some huntsmen and woodcutters have always lived in the forest. I was almost sure the witches and hags and other magical creatures probably only came out at night, but I kept an eye out for danger anyhow.

When I smelled wood smoke, I moved more cautiously forward, looking for a house and hoping to find normal people rather than some evil gnome or hag. After just a few minutes, I located the source of the smoke, but I hesitate to call the structure a house. The place hardly qualified as a hut and looked like a pile of rocks with a cap of ill-cut and dirty hay on top. Smoke issued from various fissures in the squat chimney. Given the appearance of this domicile, I was not especially surprised to see what appeared to be a severely deformed dwarf crouched by the rude door. Riding cautiously closer, I realized this was a man who looked deformed because he was hunched over a bundle of dirty rags, not a dwarf with hideously oversized feet. I had found a person; whether or not he was "normal" remained to be seen.

The man either heard the horse or had some sense of being watched. He jerked erect and turned toward me. I shuddered; he was the ugliest man I had ever seen. Greasy gray hair hung to his shoulders and obscured one eye. The other eye, small and mean, glared from beneath its bushy brow. The broad nose had a huge hump in the



middle as if it had been broken repeatedly. He scowled so that his whole face, not just his mouth, was twisted and red. Nothing about him conveyed any hint of welcome.

"I've nothin' fer ye t'day," he snarled at me.

Somewhat taken aback, I gaped at him. "Well, I should think not, as I've never seen you before in my life," I replied.

He squinted at me. "Ach, yer no' 'oo I thought. A lass? What're ye doin' int' forest? Lost yer way, 'ave ye?"

"Not exactly," I answered. "Whom were you expecting?"

"'Is Lordship the 'ighwayman, o' course. 'Oo else would I be expectin'?"

"Come on, Grandfather, I may be a lass, but even I know highwaymen need a highway people still use, or they'll be poor highwaymen indeed."

"I'm no' yer grandda, so watch yer tongue, missy," he growled.

"I was merely trying to be polite. Give me your name if you don't care for grandfather."

"I be called Ulf. And what might yer own name be?" he asked curiously.

"It might be anything, but you may call me Kate," I replied politely this time to prove my point.

"Kate, is it? Ye've not told me yet why yer int' forest. Not a very good place fer a lass to be alone." He made it sound like a threat.

"I'm seeking a kinsman," I said quickly, to let him understand that I was not likely to be alone long. "I need to go south toward the mountains. Is there a trail leading that direction?"

"Mebbe, mebbe not." He scowled again.

"What a nice, definitive answer!"

"Ye've got a tongue like an adder, missy."

"Then tell me if there is a trail or not. I can be civil when others are to me."

Another scowl. "Used to be. Mebbe grown over now."

"Ah. Was it marked with pillars like this road?" I inquired.



"Nay. 'Twere a track, not a proper road like this 'un."

I sighed. "Well, in that case, I'll just be moving on in hope of finding it somehow."

"To th' south?"

"Yes. As I said."

"There's nothin' to be 'ad in the mountains. Ye'd best turn back and get yerself 'ome to yer mam."

"My mother is dead," I said, "if you care to know. I'm traveling to my kinsman, as I also said before."

"Ye'll be sorry if ye find 'im, then. And ye likely won't, not wi'out a guide." A mercenary gleam appeared in his visible eye.

"Could you find the old road?" I inquired.

"Depends."

"On the price?" I was certain I was right. "I can pay little and none at all until I reach my kinsman."

He shrugged and turned away. "Then go yer ways, missy. I've work o' ma own." He picked up an axe that looked as dull as a spoon and as notched as a counting stick and started toward the woodpile.

As soon as Ulf turned away, what I had taken for a large bundle of dirty rags seemed to explode from the ground, sprouting arms and legs as well as a mop of dirty blond hair. The creature—a boy or a wiry man—hit the ground at a dead run. By the time Ulf spun around with a roar, brandishing his axe, the ragged form had sprinted out of sight among the trees. Ulf turned fiercely to me.

"Yer still 'ere, are ye? Get ye gone!" He brandished the axe again, coming a step nearer, so I slapped the reins on the horse's neck and urged him to a canter, leaving Ulf swearing and shouting unintelligibly. I was glad the trail soon turned so that the hut was lost to my sight and Ulf to my hearing. I didn't slow the horse for a good while.

Finally, I pulled the horse down to a trot and then a walk. I needed time to think; the encounter with Ulf had shaken me more than I liked to admit. My heart was still racing. I had no idea whom he had first taken me for, but I was fairly sure I would not care to meet any of his

associates, even if they were not highwaymen. I needed to be alert, too, for the trail southward. I was unsure how I would recognize it, but if I missed the trail, I should soon find the river which ran out of the mountains. I supposed I could just follow it upstream. It would not take me exactly where I wanted to go, but it should at least lead me out of the forest eventually.

I grew increasingly uneasy as I rode. My skin prickled; I felt unseen eyes watching me. I hoped this was merely my imagination, but as I penetrated deeper into the Dark Forest, all the old tales I had ever heard seemed to replay in my mind—dreadful stories of witches, werewolves, and shape-shifting men who became great bears, of outlaws who fled into the forest to escape justice for crimes of robbery, murder, treason, or worse. I shivered and looked around nervously. Hence my head was turned for a moment so that I did not see the man step from the trees into the path. I jerked back with a scream when I turned and saw him, but he had caught the reins and held the horse fast. A grim smile gleamed from his dirty, shaggy beard. “A horse I need, and a horse I’ll have,” he said softly. It was the ragged man who had run from Ulf’s hut into the forest. “Will you get down, or shall I just get up behind you, darlin’?”

## CHAPTER 3

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I hate to admit, even now, that I was frightened speechless for a long moment. I think I may have stammered something, but whatever it was, it made no difference. The man—certainly a man, not a boy—gave me no time to answer. Before I could think of a coherent reply, he had already suited the action to his word and was mounted behind me. Encircling my waist with one arm, he grabbed the reins out of my senseless hand and kicked the horse into a fast canter along the trail. We were moving fast by the time I managed to say, tritely and not very forcefully, “How dare you! Unhand me at once!”

He had the audacity to laugh. “No, no, I’ll not leave you behind to tell Ulf how I’ve managed to get away. Hang on tight, darlin’. ’Tis into the trees for us.” And he turned into the dense woods, plunging down a steep bank with hardly any slackening of speed.

I have ridden all my life. I did, after all, grow up among boys, and I learned to ride as they did—hard, fast, and somewhat recklessly. Well, perhaps more than *somewhat*. My horse was a hunter and responded to the course like a champion. As we raced at full speed through the trees, I was glad I had taken this one rather than the more ladylike palfrey my father had given me on my last birthday. The forest trail was little more than a track between the larger trees, often blocked by fallen limbs or looping vines. I was both breathless with sheer terror, expecting a fall at any moment, and completely lost by the time

we had been plunging through the dense evergreens for ten minutes. I couldn't guess which way the road I had been following lay.

I should have been relieved that we were slowing down, but being in less terror for my life had the effect of letting me express my anger verbally. "Are you trying to get us both killed, you madman?" I shouted.

"Shh. You sound far from dead, darlin', and with luck we've outrun the hounds now."

"Hounds?"

"Aye, darlin'. I'm sure Ulf loosed his pack as soon as he stopped shoutin' after me. We need to find the water. Hush a bit and let me listen."

"Why do we need water?" I sounded petulant, even to myself.

"The horse is thirsty, o' course," he replied reasonably. "He's carrying double and ridin' hard. Now hush."

We sat in silence for a long moment, and as my heart slowed its pounding somewhat, I heard the babble and clatter of water running over stones. My companion heard it as well and gently turned the horse toward the sound. The horse could no doubt smell the water; he picked his way through the trees for some minutes until we reached a swift-moving though shallow stream. The man guided our mount to a sloping bank and down into the water, then let the horse drop his head to drink his fill.

I felt extremely put out with myself. I had tried to think of some stinging comment I could make to force this vile man to release me, but I hadn't managed it. I knew before I said them that my words were weak. "I demand you release me and my horse, you wretched man!"

His laugh was short and sharp. "Oh no, darlin'. I need the horse, and you need me. You'll never tell me you could find your way back to the road even if you were foolish enough to risk it."

"I—"

"Nay, you'd never find your way, and I'd be a cad and a rogue to abandon you deep in the Dark Forest, now wouldn't I?" His tone was light and slightly mocking.

"Where are you taking me?" I demanded.

"You indicated to Ulf you wanted to go south," he answered. "Was that the truth?"

"Why?" I asked with ill-concealed temper.

"Because, darlin', it makes that direction a bit of a danger for you as well as me. Ulf's main source o' income is not sellin' wood; he sells information about those travelin' the road to whoever will pay the price he wants."

"He—"

"Has by now sent one of his pigeons to inform someone that a lady is travelin' toward the south to a kinsman."

"No one would be interested in me," I said, but even to me, the words were not convincing.

"O' course not." He laughed again, more softly this time. "You're as transparent as glass, darlin'; you may be dressed in a maidservant's garment, but you're no servant. 'Tis a lady you are, darlin', and someone will be looking for you, I wager."

"Stop calling me *darlin'*!" I demanded.

He laughed, obviously amused that he had annoyed me. "What's your real name, then?"

"Kate will do as well as any," I said stiffly. "What is *your* name?"

"You can call me 'Grandfather'," he teased.

"You're hardly that old!"

"True enough. Call me Rafe."

"What sort of name is that?"

"Short and simple. Rather like Kate, don't you think?" He gathered up the reins again and urged the horse forward, still in the water.

"Where are we going?"

"Downstream a ways, to the first fall. Then we'll head eastward."

"But—"

"Ulf will guess you didn't lie to him," he said patiently. "Whoever comes looking for you will be directed to look south. I'm guessing someone knows you do have kin to the south?"



“Yes,” I admitted unhappily.

“I thought as much. So we need to avoid the better-known ways o’ gettin’ there. Ulf was lyin’, you know. The old road south follows the river most o’ the way. You could hardly miss it.”

“Why, that old cheat!”

His laugh was different yet again, a warm chuckle of amusement. “That’s a *verra* mild word for Ulf. He’s a bad ’un.”

“I don’t understand why you’re helping me get away from him, though,” I admitted.

“Ah, well, as to that—I owe you a debt indeed.”

“A debt?”

“You came on him unawares, y’see, and he dropped the knife he meant to stick me with. I managed to cut my bonds and run.”

“He was going to *kill* you?” I was horrified to think I had nearly witnessed a murder. “But why?”

“Oh, not to kill me, nay. He only meant to bleed me a bit to keep me weak. He knew his reward for me alive would be four times what he could get for me dead.” His voice had turned grim as he said this.

“Then he didn’t think someone had come for you,” I surmised. “Who was he expecting?”

“Likely some local sheriff,” he shrugged, indifferent. “He’ll sell information to anyone, like I said before.”

“What have you done, that someone wants you so badly?”

“Don’t you know the forest is full o’ thieves and murderers, darlin’?” His tone was mocking again.

“So I’ve heard. But you don’t seem—”

“Like a rogue and peasant slave?” I could hear the smile in his voice. “Well, slave I’ve never yet been, but as for the rest—let’s say I’ve my own reasons not to be found and leave it at that. For the present, a southward course suits me well enough, so I’ll see you to your kinsman’s borders. If he lives in a civilized place, you should be safe enough once you’re there. Provided he’ll actually take you in. Are you sure of that?”

"I-I think he will. I don't know him well, but my mother was fond of him, and he of her."

"Good enough then. We'll reach the falls in a bit and leave the water. Leave off talkin' so we can hear them in good time to get out of the water before the channel deepens and puts us in danger of goin' right over."

As I had no desire to go plunging over a waterfall after everything I had already been through that morning, I refrained from asking any of the several dozen questions that spun through my head. For some reason, I felt this rogue was being at least basically truthful with me. If he had only wanted the horse, he could have taken it at any time. He was not a large man, but the strength in his arms and hands revealed that he was no weakling. He handled the horse like one born to the saddle, so if he was a peasant, he must have been a stableman or groom. I could not quite place his accent; it was rather lilting and musical. I wondered if I would ever learn his true story.

The water was deeper now, and I was about to mention this when he pointed ahead. "We'll be leavin' the water up there. Have you food in these bags, Kate? I could eat this good horse's weight in just about anything."

"I have some food, yes. Do we dare stop, though?"

"I'd likely not make it the next bit walkin' if I don't have somethin' to eat. You see that outcrop? We're going around it and down the cliff to find the path I have in mind, and I'd never try it on a horse, nor try to lead one down it a'tall that's as tired as this one has to be. We'll stop a bit and eat and let him crop awhile and rest."

"You're a good horseman."

"One o' my many virtues, darlin'," he chuckled. "Here we go, then. See to the bags, won't you, darlin'?" The horse climbed the bank easily, and Rafe slid to the ground and helped me dismount. I turned to retrieve the saddlebag containing food; this took only a moment. I turned back to ask if he thought we should risk a fire. Astonished, I gaped at the spot where he had stood, for there was no sign of him. It was as if he had vanished into the air!

## CHAPTER 4

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“Of all the nasty, evil tricks!” I fumed. Sensing my anger—and no doubt my fear as well—the sensible horse moved away from me. He found ample grass on the bank of the river and began at once to crop hungrily. Slinging the saddlebags over my shoulder, I stomped to a good-sized boulder and sat down hard. Regrettably, I remembered too late that boulders do not make soft seats. Needless to say, the resulting bruises did not improve my temper. As I investigated the saddlebag, I realized ruefully that I had done a remarkably poor job of provisioning myself for a journey.

“Well, at least I won’t have to share it,” I grumbled bitterly.

“You’d let a man starve instead?” Rafe asked from behind me. “Not a very charitable attitude for a lady, I must say.”

I jumped as if he had struck me, spilling the saddlebag onto the ground as I leapt up and spun to face him. “Where did you go?” I demanded—quite unnecessarily. Where he had gone was obvious as he pushed the dripping hair out of his eyes and retrieved the saddlebag before he took a seat on the boulder. “You took a swim?” I asked incredulously.

“And a damned cold one too,” he said. “I thought you might be a bit more appreciative, darlin’. Ulf’s den wasn’t the cleanest place I’ve ever been. I couldn’t do much about my breeches or boots, but I’ve washed the shirt and myself, at least.”

The swim had perhaps improved his state of cleanliness a bit. His hair was now a wet blond mop that hung in ringlets to about chin length. He also had a somewhat scruffy beard of the same straw-yellow hue. He was, as I had noted before, wiry of build and not quite of medium height. His movements were almost graceful in their efficiency.

He rummaged in the bag and remarked, "Hmm. I can see why you weren't eager to share your meager bit. You must have left in a bit of a rush." He offered me a chunk of the dark bread and some cheese. "This would hardly be enough for two scant days for you alone, and the forest itself can hardly be traversed in less than four days."

"I realized I didn't do too well on provisions," I admitted, sitting down beside him. "And yes, I left in a hurry. Things were moving along too fast to delay."

"Things?"

"My stepmother planned to have me wedded and bedded—not necessarily in that order—to her lecherous old cousin by the end of the week, before news of the plan could reach my father, who is on campaign with the royal troops on the northern plains of Dansine."

"Ah. How old?"

"Sixty at least."

"And how lecherous?" His eyes—an amazing green I had never seen before—twinkled.

"Enough. I was to be wife number four—or possibly five, I forget which—the others having all died from having too many children too young or too close together."

He gave a low whistle. "Nasty," he agreed. "I can't fault you for leaving precipitately. But the lack of provisions does cast rather a different light on our plans. We can hardly traverse the whole forest on half a loaf of bread, a chunk of cheese, and a bit of cold chicken."

"What will we do? Hunt?"

"With our bare hands and your kitchen knife here?" he asked sarcastically. "I hardly think so, darlin'. An' I don't fancy tryin' to live on nuts an' berries, either. We'll have to go farther north than I planned."



There's a sort o' village—not much o' one—at what they call the Corner of the Forest. You know the spot I mean?"

"I've seen it on a map," I nodded.

"Have you any money? I hope you were lyin' to Ulf on that point."

"I have a little," I admitted. "My stepmother made sure I had no access to much, I assure you."

"Typical," he nodded. "Well, the village is a poor enough place; we can probably get some food and a change o' clothes for a modest amount. That dress would not be my choice for extensive travel, but I'm guessin' you hadn't a chance to be too choosy about that either?"

"No."

"No matter. We'll try our luck, young Kate." His teeth flashed in a smile. "Who'd have ever thought I'd have a chance to rescue a damsel in distress?"

"Only after I rescued you first," I reminded him.

"Now that's the truth," he laughed, "even if you didn't do so on purpose. There's just no accounting for fate, is there now?"

Our descent of the cliff that marked the edge of the plateau we had been on proved to be both slow and harrowing. The distance was not so great—possibly two hundred yards from the outcrop of rock to the bottom—but much of the slope consisted of loose shale that shattered and slid under our feet and the horse's. In other places, the path was narrow and steep. Reaching the bottom seemed to take hours, and I was aching all over when we finally stood on level ground again. I had scraped hands, elbows, and knees, stretched muscles I had never realized could be so extended, and fallen on my left shoulder heavily when the shale slid and pitched me down a twenty-foot slope. We were some distance from the river, so we had to return to the water in order to bathe our wounds. My temper did not improve when I noted that Rafe had come off much better than I from our



descent. He was as surefooted as a mountain goat. I'd been rather busy with my own efforts, so I might have missed a slip or two, but he certainly bore little evidence of any mishaps.

I had a wash, the horse had a drink, and Rafe resumed his shirt, now quite dry. This time he took the saddle and the reins after putting me up on the pillory behind. "This is a good horse," he commented. "I've seen many that wouldn't have made it down that path without a fall. Does he have a name?"

"Schilling," I answered.

"An odd name. He's worth a good bit more than a schillin'."

"He was a weak foal. My father wondered if he'd ever be worth a schilling, and the name stuck."

Rafe chuckled and nudged the horse with his heels. "Well, I'm glad he grew out of it. We've got a ways to go and need to move along at a good speed; you're braver than I am if you're willin' to be abroad in the forest after dark."

"Are the tales about the forest true, then?"

"Well, I expect there's a lot o' tales that are just bogey stories, meant to keep naughty children from goin' where they have no business. But there's no denyin' there're wild beasts come out at night that I'd not care to meet, and there are outlaws it would be wiser to avoid."

"You seem to know the forest fairly well."

"Aye, well—" He sounded uncomfortable at this reminder. "Not well enough to avoid all its dangers. I got myself caught by Ulf, didn't I?"

"How did that happen?"

"Foolishness on my part. I wandered a bit farther west than I should have, and his hounds treed me."

"And he was holding you for ransom. Why would he do that?"

He was silent for a long moment, then finally said, "Those like Ulf who make their livin' on betrayal usually haunt the places they can hear o' anyone that someone is willin' to pay to find."

“Are you going to tell me your story?” I asked. “I told you mine.”

Since my arms were around his waist in order to keep myself upright on the horse, I felt him tense for a moment. Then he shrugged. “Ah, well, why not? It’ll pass the time for about two minutes. I quarreled with my father. He disowned me and turned me out. When I took along a thing as belonged to me, bein’ a gift from my grandda, my father named me thief and set the sheriffs after me. I fled like other outlawed men to the forest, and there’s an end on it.”

“And in well under two minutes,” I said, trying to make as light of it as he had. “He put a price on your head as well?”

“Aye, that he did. All the more for me alive as I’d have had to be a great fool to carry the thing far while fleeing for my life. He’s got to know I haven’t got it, but also that he’s unlikely to find it himself without me tellin’ him where I hid it.”

I didn’t intend to speak aloud because Rafe’s tensed shoulders betrayed the emotion he managed to keep out of his voice. The words just escaped from me. “It must be terrible—to be outlawed by your own father.”

I wanted to call the words back but couldn’t; at least I knew better than to multiply my carelessness by apologizing. He was silent for so long I had time to be truly miserable over my unruly tongue. His voice was very soft when he finally said, “Aye. Terrible.”

The pain of those two words pierced my very soul. I was glad Rafe could not see the tears that sprang to my eyes. As bad as my life had been since Father’s marriage to Caledonia, I had never doubted his love for me, nor that of my mother while she lived and even after she was gone. I knew I could utter no words to console Rafe for his loss; I could not even imagine how painful such a loss would be.

After what seemed a very long time, Rafe broke the uncomfortable silence. His voice was back to normal, at least. “We’re getting close to the edge of the forest. I think it’s best if we skirt around the village and arrive from the north. These villagers are apt to be suspicious

about anyone comin' out o' the Dark Forest and then sayin' they need supplies to go back into it."

"That does sound fairly suspicious, even to me."

"We can take a track not far ahead, then. There're woodcutters' tracks all in the edges of the forest. We'll need to come to the village before dark; they close the gates up tight from dusk to dawn. I doubt they'd let in the king his own self if he arrived in the night."

"Sounds sensible to me. I'm feeling a bit more hopeful than I did earlier. I actually feel as if everything is going to work out all right."

"Don't you know it's the worst kind o' luck to say such a thing aloud?" I could hear the teasing tone in his voice, so I laughed, and he joined me. We were still laughing when the net fell out of the tree, covering us and the horse.

## CHAPTER 5

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We were no longer laughing—and Rafe even stopped his impressive spate of swearing—when we realized we were surrounded by a ring of men armed with staves, axes, and long hunting knives. The apparent leader of the group brandished his double-bladed axe at us. Unlike Ulf's axe, this one looked bright, sharp, and deadly.

"Be still!" he growled. Looking up into the tree, he gave an imperious wave to unseen cohorts; the net began to lift slowly as they hauled it back into the branches above. The leader advanced on us. "Quiet yer horse and throw down yer reins!" he ordered.

"Quiet my—" Rafe began, then bit back what else he had wanted to say. His back was stiff with anger, but he quieted Schilling and threw off the reins. One of the peasants caught them in a heavy fist. "What do you want of us?" Rafe asked hotly.

"Ye know well enough, thief. We've little left after the nobles and the church are done with our harvest; we'll not give over the rest to filthy outlaws from the forest."

"I can't fault your feelin's, surely, but if you're takin' us for your thieves, you're wrong by miles. We've been traveling the whole long day."

"Take 'em t' village, Ferd," another of the men urged the leader. "We'll soon see what they 'ave on 'em."

"Aye, that's the truth, Ferd," another cried, and the rest muttered agreement. The leader fingered his axe while he scowled at us but finally nodded to the man holding the reins. "Go on, then," he said grudgingly, and we moved forward, our captors all around us so that even the thought of escape was impossible. Rafe was grimly silent, as was I. Even if we could somehow regain control of our horse, Schilling was too tired to run fast or far. The peasants with knives could probably throw with enough accuracy to wound seriously if not kill outright, and then the rest would be on us. If they searched me, I had no doubt the villagers would find the items I had secreted in my boots and my belt. Into my belt I had slipped all the coins I had hidden in the secret drawer of my desk; the amount was a good bit more than I had indicated even to Rafe, much less to Ulf. I had planned to produce no more than a few coppers if we could get supplies for them. If they found the coins, they would also find my jewels, for I had brought away my mother's ruby bracelet and sapphire earrings. These had been my father's gifts to her for their betrothal and wedding, not part of the royal treasury from which the queen could select whatever jewels it pleased her to wear. The bracelet rode around my left ankle, and the earrings were in a silk pouch nestled next to my right ankle. The peasants might not recognize them as property of the late queen, but they would know for certain that no mere maidservant such as I appeared to be should have such treasures. The villagers were looking for thieves, and I was certain they would deal harshly with those proven to their minds to be thieves.

I was thinking furiously, but I admit being frightened enough to tremble. Rafe could feel my quaking; he did not speak but covered my hands at his waist with his own. They were strong and warm, hard hands that spoke of readiness to fight if necessary. He gave my hands a reassuring squeeze. His gesture was not enough to allay all my fears, but I felt unaccountably heartened.

One look at the village convinced me that Rafe had been kind in describing it as merely "poor." The entire village would have fit with



room to spare into the main court of the castle where I had grown up. It consisted of a double row of small, mean houses, some of rough stone and some of logs, set around a square containing a well. A palisade of logs with stone towers at each corner enclosed the village, and stout gates stood at the center of the eastern wall. One house slightly larger than the others stood near the well and appeared to serve as a tavern. A number of men emerged from this building, tankards in hand, when our captors brought us to a halt outside its door. A few women and a good many children were abroad when we entered the gates, but the women swiftly dragged all the children except a few of the older boys into houses and firmly shut the doors behind them. We were left in a ring of men wearing grim and suspicious expressions.

The leader of our guard made as if to lay hands on me to pull me from my seat, but Rafe forestalled him by jumping down from the saddle and turning to lift me down. He set me on my feet and kept his body between me and the peasant leader. "You'll not harm this girl unless you're fools indeed. 'Tis no fault o' her own she's here a'tall. She was sent into the forest by her lady mistress—"

I had no idea where Rafe intended to go with his tale, but he had unknowingly given me just the opening I needed. "Aye," I exclaimed with passion. "Thhe thent me to find Willean the withe woman, to obtain a love pothion for her!" I had spent hours on end with my cousin and favorite playmate Ruegen before he grew out of his lisp; I went on almost without drawing a breath. "I wath afraid to go into the foretht alone, and I begged Rafe to come with me. Pleathe, pleathe, don't hurt uth!"

Rafe was quick on the uptake, as I had hoped he would be. "A wild boar rushed out of the trees and frighted the horse. He bolted and dumped us off. I fell into a bramble gettin' him back," he continued smoothly. "We were lost, so we followed the water to find our way out of the trees, but then we came to a cliff."

"I thlid down part of the way," I whined, showing them my scraped hands. "Oh, my mithtreth will be tho angry if I don't bring her the

pothion. Thhe'll beat me tho hard!" I covered my face with my hands and emitted great sobs. I blessed the court jester who had taught me how to produce real tears when I wanted to by biting down hard on the inside of my cheek.

"And I'll be flogged by the chief groom if anything happens to this horse," Rafe added. He put his arm around my shoulders and drew me to him so my face was against his shoulder. I guessed he didn't think I had real tears on my face and was afraid someone would notice and give away our game. "Don't cry, Katie darlin'. I'll take your beatin' as well if it comes to that. You know I will."

By this time, the villagers—women, children, and all—were in the square. I sobbed harder and threw my arms around Rafe's neck. The villagers were muttering about the perfidy of the nobles by then. Only Ferd seemed to harbor any lingering suspicions. He snorted in disgust and demanded loudly, "Oo's yer mistress then, girl?"

"Why—" Rafe began, then stopped with a repressed yelp as I trod heavily on his instep. I turned from him and let the villagers see my tear-stained face before I rubbed at it with my sleeve.

I gave one last shuddering sob and swallowed hard. "The Prinetheth Thnow White ith my mithtreth," I sniffed. I drew from my bodice a medallion my father had struck for my christening. It bore on one side the crown and profiles of both my parents; on the other was the elaborate sigil composed of the first letters of my several names. "Thhe gave me thith token to thhow to Willeean tho thhe would make the pothion for her." The peasants could not read the letters, but they knew the royal profiles which had appeared on every coin struck in the kingdom while my mother lived. They had bought my performance hook, line, and sinker. Even Ferd was convinced. He glowered at us for a moment but finally nodded.

"Aye, well. Mebbe yer not the thievin' outlaws I took ye for. Come along to the tavern, girl. Meg'll see ye have a meal and a place to sleep for the night, and we'll send ye on yer way to the witch woman for yer royal mistress in the mornin'."

Rafe did not put his arm around my shoulders again, and he refused to meet my eyes. With an inward sigh, I tucked the one piece of jewelry I had wanted the villagers to see back into my dress and followed Ferd into the tavern.

We left the village next morning with generous provisions for four days, time to reach Willean's cot on the eastern side of the forest and return to the castle where my hateful and demanding mistress waited impatiently for her love potion, no doubt to be used on some decent, unsuspecting young man who would otherwise have nothing to do with the spoiled princess. The villagers all came out to see us off, from the oldest grandfather leaning on his stick to the youngest babe, just a month old that day. At the mention of Willean, I saw a good many hands move in the sign against the evil eye, but most of their ill wishes were for the haughty princess, that she might receive some horrid bit of luck if she so much as thought of punishing me for coming late with the potion. Meg had refused to take any money for the food she packed in our saddlebags, but I pressed some on her for the change of clothes she found for Rafe and for the washing and mending of our travel-stained and torn garments.

Rafe was ominously silent as we entered the forest on the eastern side of the village and followed the road which at that point was reasonably well marked and well traveled. After almost an hour of his obstinate silence, I could stand it no more. "Aren't you going to speak to me at all, Rafe?" I inquired.

"And what would you have me say, Your Royal Highness?"

I sighed. "Please don't be that way, Rafe. I'm still the same person."

He pulled Schilling to a halt and dismounted. He left me to get down as best I could while he strode angrily away. After a few paces though, he swung around to face me.

"Are you? You must take me for a great fool if you expect me to believe that. They'll be hangin' me for sure if your father should hear

his only daughter's been rovin' the Dark Forest with me! I've already a price on my head from my own father; I hardly need another from yours!"

"I know, Rafe. I'm sorry! You-you should go. I can give you money for a horse if you want it. I never meant to cause you more trouble. I can surely reach the eastern border by nightfall. I'll be safe enough then. I can hire an escort if I feel the need."

He groaned and shook his head. "And if somethin' should happen to you and I could have prevented it, do you think I could go on livin' as such a coward? Damnation, but you've got me between the knife and the noose! I'll see you safe to your kinsman or die tryin'." He strode back to the saddlebags and pulled out his cleaned and mended clothes. "Your dress is still not the best garment to be ridin' a long way in. These will be a bit big for you, but they should do if you belt them in tight enough." He handed me the clothes and resolutely turned his back. "Tell me when you're decently covered again."

I pulled on the breeches; they were loose and a bit long, but tucked into the top of my boots they would do. The shirt was long and loose as well, but that too would work with a belt. The sleeves, though, hung down over my hands. Rafe considered the problem, first trying to roll them up.

"That's no good," I said, looking at the resulting bulges the size of melons on my wrists.

"We'll just cut them off, then," he decided and suited the action to the word. "They look a bit ragged, but that'll have to do. I wish there was a way to disguise the fact you're a girl, but no one would believe it with that hair."

"I could cut it off," I suggested, hoping he wouldn't agree. I need not have worried.

"I'd as soon keep my head on my shoulders long enough to try convincin' your father I've done you no harm, darlin'. If he learned I agreed to let you chop it off, I expect he'd have me headless in one blow without a fare-thee-well even if I do get you to your kinsman



unharméd.” Suddenly his eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open. “Dear God, your kinsman! He’s the king o’ Wittenbach!”

“Yes. Why?”

He dropped his forehead into one open palm and shook his head.

“Dear God!” he groaned. “Of all the cursed luck!”

“What?” I demanded.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. His face was a mask set in disbelief. “I am not—unknown—in Wittenbach. I’ve been careful not to show my face there for three years.”

I bit my lip. “You don’t have to come with me, Rafe. Really, I’m sure—”

“Oh yes I do,” he said grimly. “Come on; there’s a ways to go. Keepin’ alert to present danger’s the best way I know to put off thinkin’ o’ all the unpleasant ends I can see to this journey unless my luck takes a turn for the better.”



## CHAPTER 6

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A harsh, grating sound, like stone over stone, startled us both. We spun around and discovered that we were not alone. A squat, distorted form—a mountain dwarf by his armor—stood in the deep shadows of a looming evergreen. I had never seen so evil a visage. Reddish eyes glared from either side of a huge hooked nose that protruded from grizzled brows and a square-cut beard. His eyes seemed to glow with fire, giving him a demonic look. The grating sound was apparently what passed for his laugh; it held no amusement, however. He grasped a razor-sharp, broad-bladed spear in one hand and a mace in the other, and he advanced quickly with the spear pointed straight at me.

“Down on your belly, scum!” he barked at Rafe. “Now, unless you’d see the girl gutted like a pig!”

“Durstig—” Rafe began.

The dwarf put his spear point against my abdomen and grinned evilly at Rafe. With a curse, Rafe went down on his front. Dropping the mace, the dwarf pulled shackles from his belt and threw them at my feet.

“Pick them up, girl! Lock his wrists behind his back with the short chain and his ankles together with the longer one. Do it, unless you’d rather watch him die here and now.”

I picked up the heavy chains. The dwarf kept his spear point on my back as I knelt and snapped the heavy bands around Rafe’s wrists and

ankles. With a grunt of satisfaction, the dwarf exchanged his spear for a dagger and snapped a second pair of wrist manacles on my arms. At least he let me keep my hands in front of me. Rafe was expostulating profanely all the while. The gist of his comments was that I had no part in the matter between the dwarf and himself and that if harm came to me at the dwarf's hands, every one of my human kindred would descend like lions on the dwarf's mountain homeland and tear it stone from stone.

The dwarf laughed again. "Let them come!" He landed a vicious kick with his iron-shod boot in Rafe's side and prodded me with his dagger. "Get on the horse, girl, or I'll leave you here for the beasts to devour." I could see no way out of our predicament at the moment, so I lifted my chained hands to the pommel of the saddle and managed to pull myself up. The dwarf had retrieved his spear. "Throw me the reins," he demanded, spear aimed at my midsection. I threw the reins down; he caught them in a mailed fist and turned back to Rafe. "Get on your feet, thief. It's a long walk to the halls of my lord. The sooner you start walking, the sooner you'll know his pleasure." With another evil laugh, he prodded Rafe with the spear; our journey south had begun in earnest, and I could think of nowhere I had less rather be going.

We made a grotesque little parade as we trudged hour on endless hour through the Dark Forest. The dwarf kept Rafe moving by prodding him with the spear while he tramped heavily behind with Schilling's reins tied to his belt. I sat in misery on the horse trying to remember all I knew about the mountain dwarfs. Little of it reassured me in the least. A number of different dwarf clans inhabited the mountains; all were famous for their skill at stone and metal work, but they were also famous for their greed, and most clans also for their enmity toward humans. They warred among themselves almost constantly, their fiercest battles always provoked by one clan allowing a human to acquire a treasure that another dwarf chieftain desired for his own.

Against the human unlucky enough to hold that treasure, the wrath of the greedy chieftain's clan was undying, through generations of human and dwarf kind. I guessed that Rafe must be unlucky enough to be such a human; he had spoken of something his grandfather had given him that was sufficiently valuable that its loss had moved his own father to declare him an outlaw and place a price on his head; a dwarf-made treasure of some sort would certainly seem to be just such a valuable item, but I had no way of knowing if my guesses were correct. With the grim dwarf between us, I could not ask, nor would Rafe have answered. I was left to my gloomy reflections as the day wore on, hour after weary hour, as we penetrated ever deeper into the Dark Forest, toward what end I could not know and dared not even surmise in such a dismal mood.

In all the tales of dwarfs I knew, they were reputed to be tireless, able to march day and night without stopping for either rest or food, but even Durstig knew we had to stop when full dark came. For one thing, he wanted to be sure his prisoners were secure for the night, and even he could see that the horse was flagging after the long march with barely a pause at midday for water. When he finally called a halt, we were in a place where the evergreens grew thick and close to the path, but there was a small open space nearby where a spring bubbled over rocks to join a larger stream.

His first act upon reaching this small clearing was to chain Rafe to one of the larger trees. This seemed to be done just to emphasize his prisoner's helplessness; Rafe could not have escaped even if the dwarf had freed his hands and feet. He sagged in weariness against the tree, his eyes closed and his face haggard. I was permitted a few moments of privacy only when the dwarf had fitted a noose around my neck. He kept hold of the loose end of the rope while I hid myself in a dense patch of undergrowth. I wanted to take the saddle off Schilling for the night, but there was no way I could handle it with my wrists shackled, so I merely loosened the girth and was permitted to take down the saddlebags for food.

“Are you going to loose his hands so he can at least eat and drink, or do you intend to starve him to death?” I asked bitterly.

The dwarf emitted his grating laugh. “For my part, he could starve and I would not care. But my lord would then miss the pleasure of roasting him over a long, slow fire, slicing off his flesh as it cooks and feeding it to the hunting dogs before his eyes. Feed him if you wish, girl. My lord will be grateful to you perhaps; he might even spare you the sight of seeing your lover die a lingering death.”

Neither Rafe nor I ate much with that grisly scene filling our imaginations, but he gave me a small smile of gratitude for the effort I made to feed him a few bites and hold a skin of water to his mouth so he could drink. Durstig watched us with a nasty smirk on his face, all the while fingering his knife while the flickering light of the small fire he had built played redly along the blade like shining streaks of blood. Once I had put the food away, he directed me to take a blanket from the other pack.

“Lie down, scum,” he directed Rafe with another kick to the ribs. Rafe bit back a cry of pain and lay down on the ground on his side. The dwarf waved his knife at me. “Come lie down with him, face-to-face, so he can warm you with his kisses if you like.”

“Leave her be, you demented devil!” Rafe shouted.

With an evil chuckle, Durstig kicked him again. “Shut up, scum! Put the blanket over both of you, girl, and lie down with your lover. Let him see and feel you next to him and know he will never have you more. I could hardly have devised a better torment if I had tried. Sleep well!”

I didn’t want Rafe to see my tears, but I couldn’t prevent it. My face was wet with them, and I could not stop them coming. Durstig moved away from us, still laughing his nasty, grating guffaw.

Rafe leaned close to me and gently kissed my damp cheeks. “Shh, darlin’, don’t cry for me. I’m not worth it.”

Though his voice had been the merest whisper, Durstig heard his words. He gave another loud guffaw. “He never said a truer word to

you, girl. He is not worth tears or pity. Now go to sleep! We leave at first light whether you have rested or not.”

“I’m better now,” I whispered back to Rafe. I snuggled closer to him and turned on my back. “Rest your head on my shoulder, Rafe. If nothing more, I can make you a pillow this night.”

Rafe, weary with more than just his bruises and the long march, was soon asleep, but tired as I was, it was a long time before I closed my eyes and slipped into a restless doze. Lying on the hard ground and restless from dreams too horrible to recall, I woke several times during the night and found the sight of Durstig’s evil red eyes upon us as distressing as any of the dreams.



## CHAPTER 7

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I have tried without total success to suppress my memories of the next four days. I am still occasionally troubled by nightmares featuring clanking chains, weariness of body and spirit, and two faces—that of Rafe, growing ever more haggard and sunken-eyed, and that of Durstig, full of evil gloating over his victims' increasing pain and despair. My own face could hardly have been more attractive, but I was fortunately spared the necessity of seeing it. Rafe's assertion that I looked like an angel of mercy I put down to his weariness and mental anguish causing him to hallucinate.

By the morning of our sixth day as Durstig's prisoners, we were well into the mountains, where autumn was already making itself felt. The nights were chilly, and the ground was cold despite its thick cover of evergreen needles. I worried terribly about Rafe, who suffered constant pain from Durstig's regular practice of kicking him every time he got a chance. I was certain he had cracked ribs from the repeated blows. The back of his shirt was caked with dried blood; Durstig frequently jabbed him with the spear to keep him moving. I was certain that sleeping on the cold ground was just adding to his pain and weakness. I had thought the previous two nights that he felt feverish when he rested his head on my shoulder to sleep.

Durstig roused us in his usual manner, by delivering kicks to Rafe's back and side. "Get up! I want my bed tonight, and I mean to reach it. On your feet, you filthy cur!"

I think by then both Rafe and I were so used to Durstig's vicious actions and words that we would have missed any additional edge he might have displayed. To be honest, I doubt Rafe would have noticed anything short of a knife in his gut. I was certain he was feverish, yet all I could do in the short time Durstig allowed us was make sure he drank a good quantity of water. We had been moving for some quarter hour, I suppose, though it felt much longer, when the attack came. I had no premonition; there was no warning. Durstig cried out once as the first arrow pierced his knee and felled him. No second cry came when his head was jerked back and his throat slit. A fountain of bright blood hit Schilling, who shied and would have bolted but that the reins were still tied to Durstig's belt. I clung to the pommel in hopes I would not fall.

I looked up to see Rafe fall to his knees as three dwarf warriors surrounded him. I would have cried out, but a spear shaft touched my shoulder, and I looked down to see another dwarf signaling me to remain silent. I was so used to Durstig's harsh voice I could hardly believe the quiet, calm words I heard issued from a dwarf's mouth. "The Kreller's kinsmen are near enough to have heard him cry out. We must make haste to be gone before they reach this place. Remain silent if you value your life or his." He nodded toward Rafe, whom the three dwarfs were half supporting, half carrying up a steep bank.

Although physically similar in build and height to Durstig, these dwarfs were fairer of hair and features. The average height of mountain dwarfs is about four and a half feet; some are smaller and some larger, of course, and so it was with these. Like all dwarfs I had ever seen, these wore their hair in multiple slim braids pulled back and bound at the nape of the neck. They all had beards, square-cut but of varying lengths, depending I guessed on age. Whereas Durstig's beard had been grizzled, streaked with dark in places, these dwarfs had hair

ranging from reddish blond to true blond, almost white, and their eyes were all a clear, light blue, like a mountain lake in the sun.

While the one dwarf was speaking to me, another had cut loose Schilling's reins and swiftly led the horse with me still on him up the bank following the others. The one who had spoken to me and two more made up a rearguard as we climbed the bank and finally reached a level place. The speaker came up beside me again.

"Can you dismount?" he queried, and at my nod went on. "Do so, and see to your companion. Give him water at least; he is ill. Keep him quiet while we return to deal with the Kreller vermin. We will go on to our camp beyond the pass when we return, and there you may take food and rest."

Two of the dwarfs stayed to guard us; one helped Rafe sit up to drink water from the skin. Neither spoke, but their faces were not evil, merely cautious. After a few moments, there were shouts and the clash of weapons as the dwarfs obviously met and dealt savagely with Durstig's kinsmen on the trail below. The skirmish soon ended; in a few minutes, the others in our rescue party returned. The speaker, obviously the leader of the patrol, squatted down beside Rafe and me, a frown on his face.

"He is ill," he said again. "I am called Torgas, and I am responsible for this patrol. We cannot take time to remove all the shackles here; we have no chisels, but Jegner can break a link of the ankle chains, and we must put him on the horse. Are you able to walk? We go to the pass above." He pointed over the trees to a rocky pass. "Our camp is just beyond."

"I can walk," I assured him. "I'll crawl if I have to."

"You have spirit," the dwarf nodded approvingly. "Jegner, break the chain and let us go as quickly as we can."

They managed to get Rafe on the horse, and the one who had led Schilling up the hill before again took the reins and led him up the steep and rocky path toward the pass. The dwarf who had broken the chain with two sharp blows of a stone went next, with me behind him.

Where the path was extremely steep, he held out a hard but steady hand to help me climb. The others came behind, with Torgas the leader as rearguard for his patrol. After nearly an hour, we reached the pass and soon entered the armed camp just beyond it.

As our patrol entered, another was ready to march out. Torgas conferred quickly with the leader in the sibilant-heavy dwarf language. The other leader whistled sharply to another dwarf who ran to him, listened to quick words, and then ran out of the camp in front of the patrol. While this was happening, the other members of our party had got Rafe down off the horse, and a groom had led Schilling away toward what appeared to be stables for the usual mountain ponies the dwarfs rode when necessary. Torgas joined us as soon as the runner had left and directed the men to take us to the smithy.

“We will remove the shackles first,” he said, “and then tend your friend’s wounds. Come.”

The smithy was a busy place; three dwarfs were working on weapons of some sort, but when Torgas called out, one plunged his hot metal into a water bucket and snatched up a chisel and hammer. A few sharp blows with the chisel had the shackles off in a matter of minutes, by which time a beardless dwarf had appeared to lead us toward the largest building. We went through a hall with tables and benches and into a sleeping room. A basin of warm water, a pile of cloths, and jars of ointment stood on the table near the bed.

“Will you need help to tend your friend?” the dwarf asked, and I was startled to recognize a woman’s voice. She smiled at my surprise. “Yes, I am a woman of the dwarf kind. I am called Nualla. Do you need help?”

“I think I can manage, thank you. You have supplied all I would ask for.”

“I will bring wine laced with medicine for the fever and pain in a few moments. He needs sleep and time to recover. I will return with the wine.”



Rafe had collapsed on the bed. I hated to disturb him, but I had to get his shirt off him. "Can you roll on your stomach, Rafe? I need to soak your shirt so I can get it off you without ripping open all the cuts."

He rolled over with an effort, and I was wetting his shirt with the cloths when Nualla returned with the wine. Without a word, she set the wine down and handed me her belt knife to cut away the blood-soaked shirt. I nodded my thanks and got on with it.

I think the whole process was as hard on me as on Rafe. He never cried out, but I heard him draw in his breath through clenched teeth a number of times, and I kept apologizing for hurting him so. Before I began applying the ointment, which I knew would initially sting in the cuts, I made him drink the wine which was apparently heavily laced with medicine. He was drowsing so that I did need Nualla to help me sit him up to wrap bandages tightly around his ribcage, which showed a sickening mass of bruises of every color from black and purple to green and yellow. My fingers found cracks in several ribs. Nualla and I removed his boots, then covered him with a blanket before we left the sleeping room with the remains of the shirt and the basin of bloody water.

"Come," said the dwarf woman, leading me back to the hall, where she threw the bloody scraps of the shirt into the fire. "You too are battered and tired. Sit here in the hall, and I will see what food is to be had." She took the basin from me and left me staring into the fire. I was almost asleep when Torgas spoke and then sat across from me.

"He sleeps?" he asked first; as I nodded, he continued. "It is good. I have sent this news to my lord. The decision of what to do with you is not mine but his. I cannot say what doom he will pronounce for you, but even if it is death, it will be a death with whatever honor your courage merits. I will speak for your courage and for his as well. How long did the Kreller hold you in his power?"

"Today began the sixth day. We have traveled from the corner of the Dark Forest here in that time."



His face hardened. "The Krellerin will pay much for such cruelty. Durstig was well known to be a sadistic swine. That you have survived such a march at all says much for your spirit and courage. Why did he take you prisoner?"

"I have no idea. He knew Rafe; it may have been Durstig the woodsman Ulf expected to come for Rafe when he held him captive, but I don't know."

Torgas scowled. "We know of Ulf the woodsman, the bounty hunter who sells news of a man's passage to the highest bidder. How did he escape Ulf's hold?"

I explained Rafe's escape, our flight to the forest corner, and our captivity by Durstig. While I told my story, Nualla came with food for both of us and then sat down to listen to my tale. When I had done, she spoke to Torgas.

"Enough questions, Torgas. She is weary and needs rest almost as much as the man."

"Indeed yes." He stood and bowed slightly. "Go with Nualla. She will see to your needs. Rest and regain your strength. Forngal will speak with you when he arrives. I bid you farewell for now."

"Come," Nualla said when he had gone. "I will take you to the women's lodge. You may bathe and sleep, and we will find clothes for you to wear." So saying, she led me out of the hall and across the open yard of the camp to a lodge where other dwarf women were performing perfectly ordinary domestic tasks like mending shirts and socks, polishing silverware, and grinding herbs with mortar and pestle.

My surprise was apparent to all of them, and set them to laughing merrily. I stammered an apology, but the eldest of the group, the one mending socks, shook her head and spoke quietly. "I am called Toska; it is not usual for a human woman to come among dwarf kind," she said, "and no human male would be allowed to reach a women's lodge and leave to tell the tale. Most people who see a dwarf woman never know they have because we seldom dress differently from the men, and the construction of our garments hides differences in shape as

well. Be at your ease among us; we are all women here, so you have nothing to fear.”

“I can see that I have much to learn about dwarf kind, though,” I said, taking the seat she indicated. “Most people don’t even believe there *are* dwarf women.”

“That is a rumor our menfolk are likely to encourage,” another of the women smiled. “I am called Mayda. How are you to be called?”

“Call me Kate, please. Is this your home?”

“No, no,” Toska explained. “Our homes are near the mines, but there are always some women in the armed camps, to do just this sort of work—mending and making medicines and cooking. It aids the men who guard our land, because it frees them from such mundane chores. Most unmarried dwarf women volunteer for a period of time in such work. It is where many of our sisters come to know their future mates.”

“How amazing,” I said, “and how very sensible!”

“The bath is ready,” Nualla announced, returning from a curtained doorway. “Come, Kate. You will feel better when you are clean; then you must rest. The nightgown I have left you will be a bit short, but you are a small human, so it will not matter much. We will find you suitable clothes before you wake.”

She pulled the curtain closed as she left me alone to bathe. I shed my stiff, grimy clothes with alacrity and moved toward the basin as I loosed my hair. The dwarf women had provided a place to wash myself and my hair more or less clean before I stepped into the hot, herb-scented tub to soak away aches. I may have dozed in the bath; it felt so good. I know I had never appreciated being clean quite so much as I did when I stepped out and dried off with a soft towel.

The linen gown was a bit short but cool and soft against my skin. Nualla called from beyond the curtain. “Leave your old clothes in the room, Kate,” so I did, removing only my mother’s jewelry. I had never worn a nightgown with pockets before, but I was amused and glad that this one had them as I slipped the jewels into them.

Nualla led me down a short hall to a sleeping room. The shutters were closed, so the room was dim. As I sank into the bed, however, I could hear sounds from the yard outside—the sound of many boots and the jingle and clank of armor and weapons. Nualla had gone, closing the door behind her, but I did not really need to ask what was happening. The men in the yard were preparing for battle. I realized that I was right in the center of one of the legendary clan wars of the dwarfs. I wondered if our arrival had precipitated the war and if the lord of this clan would require our blood in payment for the injuries his people suffered. Not even the knowledge that dwarf law would permit just such a blood price could keep my eyes open, however. I fell into a dreamless sleep and knew nothing more for the rest of the day.

## CHAPTER 8

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Consciousness returned only when Nualla entered the room with a lamp. The sounds of soldiers still drifted in from the yard, but night had fallen.

“Are you wakeful?” she asked. “You have slept the day. I have brought you clothes. It is good you are a small human; these will fit you well enough. Come to the common room when you are ready, and we will go to the mess for food.”

I found the dwarf garments interesting; the linens were obviously underclothes, a vest and short trews, though different in design from those to which I was accustomed. There were fine woolen stockings, soft leather breeches, and a woolen shirt. Over all went a vest worked with elaborate embroidery. My own boots, cleaned and polished, and my belt, the coins still in it, completed the outfit. I rebraided my hair and went to the common room. Nualla smiled at me as she rose.

She was remarkably pretty and indeed looked very feminine, now that I knew she was a girl about my own age. Her hair was blonde, like that of all her kin. Hers was true golden blonde, like looking at sunlight through a jar of pale honey. Like all dwarfs, she controlled its natural bushy curliness by wearing it in multiple slim braids pulled back and bound. She was slightly taller than average, being only a little less than five feet tall—not so much shorter than my own human shortness. I envied her warm, slightly tan complexion. That “skin white

as snow” I was blessed (or cursed) with was not really white, but it was extremely fair. In summer, it burned and peeled but never got any darker. Nualla gave me a sweet smile and took my arm to lead me out of the room.

“I think you might pass for a tall dwarf maiden but for that hair, Kate. None of ours is so soft and smooth.” Together we crossed the yard already filled with troops of dwarfs; still more marched through the gate as we entered the large mess hall. Mail-clad and armed dwarfs occupied most of the tables, eating, drinking, and talking in low, serious tones.

“What’s happening, Nualla? Please tell me.”

“I will. Sit here by the fire and I will bring food.” Nualla stopped to speak with another dwarf woman who was filling cups with ale. This woman brought two cups for us; Nualla returned with two steaming plates of savory stew and sat across from me.

“This looks like preparation for a battle, Nualla.”

“So it is,” she nodded. “The Krellerin march toward our borders even now. Our men will meet them in battle by morning.”

“All because of Rafe and me?”

She shook her head. “No, truly. You are but a single drop in a waterfall of ills between our clans. The enmity of the Krellerin and the Grenzlerin spans centuries, even eons. Among all the clans, our two have been more often at war than any other pair.”

“I feared our rescue had led to the battle.”

“No, it is the other way around. The preparation for war led to your rescue. A spy was caught near our lord’s hall some days ago, and the call to arms went out at once. Because our men were already patrolling the lower slopes, they saw Durstig with his prisoners and acted to free you and deprive the dark Kreller lord of his prize. Be glad they did; among all our people none are so cruel to their prisoners as the Krellerin.”

“I can well believe it; Durstig described in excruciating detail the fate that awaited Rafe at the hands of his lord.”



Her eyes darkened. "He would. Durstig's name has long been evil. He was counted a master among that clan of torturers; many of our people have died in his hands."

"He seemed to take pleasure from tormenting Rafe especially. How is Rafe?"

"Have you eaten? Good. Keista says he is restless and calls for you. You should go to him. You recall where? Good. I will bring more wine shortly."

I found Mayda with Rafe; as I entered, she removed one cloth from his brow and replaced it with another she had wrung out over a basin on the table. She beckoned me closer.

"His fever is rising. He calls for you, though. Come and speak to him; he may hear you through his fevered dreams and wake. I must go to help in the kitchen; the arriving troops need food."

"I'll sit with him then. Thank you for your care."

I pulled a stool to the bedside and took one of Rafe's hands in both of mine. His skin was hot and dry, and he muttered and moved restlessly. Through the jumble of half-uttered words, I could distinguish only a few; he repeated "father" and "exile" a number of times, "Durstig," "no, no!" and then "Kate." I leaned close to him and spoke.

"I'm here, Rafe. It's Kate. I'm here with you."

Perhaps he did hear me, for he quieted. When I would have taken away my hands to wring out another cold cloth, he clutched at the one that lay beneath his, so I left it. After several minutes, his eyes opened, dark and haunted in the dim light from the shaded silver lamp beside the basin, but they were aware. "Kate," he whispered brokenly. "Don't leave me."

"I'm here, Rafe. I'm not leaving. Give me my hand for just a moment. You're feverish; I need to replace this cloth with a cool one."

He allowed me to wring out and replace the cloth, his eyes following my movements. I returned to my stool and let him clasp my hand again.

"Am I awake, then, or still in a dream?" he asked, sounding groggy.

"You're awake. The drugs are still fogging your brain a bit. You must have more soon, to fight this fever."

"Where are we? Do I hear soldiers?"

"We are in the armed camp of the enemies of Durstig's people. They rescued us. Durstig is dead, Rafe; he can't hurt you again."

A shudder passed through his body at the mention of the name. He closed his eyes as if in denial. "How long—?"

"Shh. Days. But it's over, Rafe."

He opened his eyes and gazed imploringly into mine. "Don't leave me, Kate. Please don't leave me."

"I won't leave you, Rafe. I promise."

His words slurred a bit; he wasn't over the effect of the drug entirely. "You tended my hurts," he murmured, "with your gentle lady's hands. Like a lover." He brought the hand he still held to his lips and held it there.

Nualla brought the wine and helped me sit Rafe up long enough to drain the cup. He thanked her as she left; then his eyes sought mine again.

"I should never have said that before, Kate. I'm sorry. You should go; it's not right for us to be alone."

"I'm staying, as I promised. You need tending; you're still feverish. Lie easy and let the medicine work. I'll tell you the story my mother used to tell me whenever I was ill. Just close your eyes and listen."

He clasped my hand still, but he closed his eyes as I began the story. After a few minutes, his grip loosened, and I knew he was sleeping. Somewhere deep inside, I knew something more, but I pushed it down, out of conscious admission.

Keista, who had served me ale earlier, came to sit with Rafe; I was summoned to the mess hall, she told me.

"Our lord has arrived. He wishes to speak with you before he must order the battle plans, and then you should rest. This man will

call for you again when the medicine wears off. We will watch until then and send for you.”

According to the custom of the dwarfs, the Grenzlerin lord stood to receive me. The snowy hair of his many braids and beard proclaimed his age, but he still presented an imposing figure, with broad shoulders and a straight back. He wore full chain mail as if it were as light as silk. His face grave, he bowed slightly and waved me to a seat, then sat as he spoke. “I am called Forngal. We are honored to welcome the Princess Snow White to our land.”

“I hope you will call me Kate, Honored One. How do you know me?”

“Princess, your disappearance has caused much consternation. If your father or uncle learns who has been your companion these many days, it will cause a great deal more. How fares Rafe MacHanlan?”

“Is that his name? He is sleeping from the drugs, but he still has fever. He grows restless when the medicine wears off. Do you know him?”

“I know him. He may not recall our meeting as he was very young. His is not a happy tale. Has he told it to you?”

“Not all. I know that when he quarreled with his father, he was exiled and outlawed, with a price on his head. If there is more, he has not told me.”

“Then I shall not. The burden is his to reveal or hold, as he chooses.”

I nodded acceptance, and he smiled in approval. “Torgas has told me of your courage. You must keep it a bit longer. We have a battle to fight; when it is over, we will see you to your uncle’s court in Wittenbach. It stands on our border, and we want to hold the peace that has long existed between us.”

“I thank you, Honored One. I am already deep in your debt for my freedom from the Kreller Durstig.”

“You owe no debt, Kate. To catch that one alone and send him to his dark reward has been the desire of all our people for years.”

He rose, signaling dismissal. "Go now," he said. "I must meet with my officers. Do not fear! We are ready for this battle earlier than the Krellerin expected. They will not come near the camp before we rout them. Sleep well!"

Surprisingly I did sleep; I had not expected to after spending most of the day in bed. It was still deep dark outside when Mayda woke me; the camp was eerily quiet.

"The troops have all gone," she told me. "He calls for you, Kate. Will you come?"

I had not undressed, just slipped off my boots and vest, so I could hurry to Rafe's side. He was still hot, but he was beginning to sweat; his hands were damp when I took them in mine. As I sat watching Rafe sleep, the dark beyond the shutters lessened until finally weak sunlight filtered through the closed slats. When Rafe opened his eyes, they were not so pain-ridden as before.

"You're still here," he said, with wonder in his voice.

"I told you I wouldn't leave you. You're better. The fever's broken."

"You made me better."

"I had help. The women here are very skilled."

"It's quiet. The soldiers?"

"The enemy is engaged. I heard distant battle horns some time ago, but the wind must have shifted, or the battle itself. I've heard nothing for almost an hour."

"You sound like a general," he said.

"Are you surprised? My father's library is full of military annals. I spent the last two years reading so as to avoid my stepmother, who dislikes books of any sort. And as a child, I played with the pages and squires, so I reenacted every battle their tutors made them study."

"General Kate," he murmured, "is there water?"

Sitting to drink made him reel with dizziness. He collapsed again on the bed. "I feel like I rolled down a cliff and hit every rock twice."

"You have half a dozen cracked ribs and a score of cuts on your back. I hate to mention it, but they're going to need dressing again."



“Must you? Even if I promise to be good?”

“I don’t want to tempt that fever to come back due to infection. Steel yourself to be brave.”

Nualla helped me get the dressings changed after Rafe had drunk another cup of the herb-laden wine. He remarked that it tasted terrible.

Nualla smiled at me over his head. “He must be better.”

“Yes, enough so to complain. Men are such babies about taking medicine.”

“How many more times are you going to put me through this?” he wanted to know when we were done and he was lying back on the bed.

“I think the cuts will heal with just one more dressing, so we can leave the bandages on tomorrow. It’s the ribs that are so bad. Even one cracked one hurts.”

“Ah, that ought to teach me not to be so greedy, shouldn’t it?”

“I hope so. If you collect more injuries the next time, think how much you’ll complain I’m hurting you when I tend them.”

He took my hands in his and kissed them both. “I won’t mind a bit if you’re there to patch me up, darlin’.” He caught himself and bit his lip. “I’m sorry. It’s the drug talkin’. I shouldn’t be so familiar to you.”

“I don’t mind.”

He sounded utterly miserable as he said, “You can’t mean that.”

“And why not?”

“You’re a princess, Kate, and I-I’m less than nobody.”

I cringed at the pain in his voice. It didn’t come from his physical injuries this time; this hurt was far older and deeper. “You’re somebody to me, Rafe. Don’t worry on it. Let the drug work and go to sleep. You’ll be better when you wake again.”

“Will you be here?”

“I’ll be here. I promise.”

By midmorning, dwarfs began returning to the camp, bringing with them the wounded and the dead. I helped the women assist the battle



surgeons and served food to the litter carriers. I checked on Rafe at intervals to make sure he stayed free of fever. Near dark, I found him not only awake but sitting up.

"Did you take my breeches off me?" he asked indignantly as soon as I entered.

"And what if I did?" I asked. He turned red from throat to hairline; I couldn't help laughing. "I didn't, actually. One of the battle surgeons' assistants did that after we dressed your wounds the first time. You were insensible to anything by then."

"You're wicked, you are, Kate."

I laughed again. "If you're well enough to worry about that, you're well enough to eat. I'll be back." I brought him stew and bread; I was pleased to see him eat well. He made a face when I handed him the cup of wine, though.

"Again?" he protested.

"It's the last until tomorrow night. You can get up tomorrow if you feel like it. In fact, you'll probably be more comfortable out of bed than in by then."

"All right, then. I'll drink it. Are you goin' to finish the story you started tellin' me?"

"Uh, well—" I smiled. "I never heard the end of it myself. I think Maman only made up the beginning to lull me to sleep."

As I had hoped, he laughed but then sucked in his breath through clenched teeth. "Ah, that hurts now."

"I'm so sorry," I apologized. "I should have remembered not to make you laugh."

"You'll have to make it up to me, then," he teased, smiling gently.

"And how would I do that?"

"Hmm. You could sing me a lullaby."

"You've never heard me sing," I laughed. But he gave me a sad-eyed look, so I relented. "All right, then; I'll give it a try. Let me trim the lamp first." I trimmed the little silver lamp to burn low and then sat back down and smoothed his hair back from his face with one hand.

“Close your eyes,” I said softly, then began to sing the only lullaby I could remember.

Close your eyes, little one, close your eyes.  
You are safe in your mother’s embrace.  
Close your eyes, little one, close your eyes.  
All your fears and your worries erase.

Go to sleep, little one, go to sleep.  
Know your mother is caring for you.  
Go to sleep, little one, go to sleep.  
You will wake to a day that is new.

Rafe was asleep before the last line, but I did not move for some time. As I watched him sleeping, I reflected morosely that my father would probably agree that he was “less than nobody.”

## CHAPTER 9

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Taking refuge from Caledonia at my uncle's court had seemed, at the time, like a good idea. In retrospect, I realized as soon as I reached his castle that I had made that plan with insufficient data. By the time I had been in Wittenbach a full day—no, make that a full afternoon—I had multiple reasons to regret my initial decision. None of those reasons even counted the fact that I was missing a certain green-eyed, chance-met companion, because at the time, I was still denying the fact that I did miss him.

The battle between the Grenzler and Kreller clans had lasted two full days with major troop engagement; by late the second day, however, the action had resolved into a series of skirmishes as the Grenzlerin pursued the Krellerin who had been routed and dispersed into small groups turning at bay whenever a Grenzler company caught up with them. No one can deny that the Krellerin fight well; the Grenzlerin bought their victory with many injuries and too many deaths.

Forngal and those in the vanguard returned to the camp late in the afternoon of that second day. Almost immediately, Forngal summoned Rafe to his quarters and remained closeted with him until night. This interview did not seem to brighten Rafe's spirits; dispensing food in the mess hall, I saw Rafe leave afterward looking both pensive and unhappy.

The well-known (and equally inaccurate) version of my life asserts that I spent an unspecified time ministering to the domestic needs of seven basically cheerful, whistling dwarfs. In actuality, I spent less than a week helping a number of dwarf women see to the domestic needs of approximately 1,700 battle-weary dwarfs. They were far from happy, whistling little men in wool hoods with picks over their shoulders. Rather, they were justly glad of their enemies' defeat but mournful over the loss of too many friends and comrades in arms. The women's work included looking after the wounded that the battle surgeons were able to save and helping prepare those they could not for honorable burial. The usual tasks of feeding the troops also fell mostly to the women, so I had scant time to talk to Rafe in those days following the battle. He was out of danger from infection and out of bed; if he needed his ribs rewrapped, he went to the battle surgeons, I guess. In any case, he did not seek me out for that or any other reason.

After a few days, Forngal summoned me to speak with him about the resumption of my delayed journey to Wittenbach. "I have considered the sensibilities of your human kindred and the wisdom of providing for you an adequate and appropriate companion. I have decided to send Nualla; she has expressed a desire to travel abroad among the human lands, and she has come to view you almost as a sister. It is not our custom, but she wishes to go, so I permit it."

"I am delighted to have Nualla as a companion, Honored One. I confess I am glad to have someone going with me, for I know no one at my uncle's court well. I cannot imagine I would find a better friend among them."

"Her presence may also allay some potentially awkward questions about your companion in the Dark Forest. It would be best if you did not mention the name of Rafe MacHanian to your uncle or the members of his court."

"He told he was not unknown in Wittenbach, Honored One."

“Rafe has a talent for attracting attention in the wrong quarter wherever he goes. I would not like to be forced to betray one ally to protect another, so I hope your uncle will not learn of his presence in our lands.”

“He shan’t learn it from me.”

“Somehow I was sure you would see that he did not.”

The journey to my uncle’s court was so uneventful as to be boring apart from my interest in the countryside and the towns we passed through. Admiring the landscape did not absorb all the available time, so I spent the bulk of the trip trying to answer Nualla’s questions about human manners, customs, and behaviors. Regrettably, all I knew and told her in those few days could not prepare her for the royal court of Wittenbach; I know, because even I was ill-prepared for that madhouse.

My uncle, Escanor IV von Wittenbach is totally unlike my father (I can use my uncle’s real name because he had six sisters, but I am not telling which one was my mother). Father is a rather serious, quiet, and introspective man who likes to read, dislikes “frippery,” and has no use at all for hangers-on. The court where I grew up reflected my father’s tastes almost entirely; the exception to this was that he indulged my mother’s love of jewelry and her habit of sewing for me constantly. Ours was a very orderly household with no excess of courtiers or ladies in waiting, which is why the only noble children around to be my playmates were boys. I could not have imagined any court like the one in Wittenbach because nothing in my life up to then prepared me for the collection of lunatics that inhabited the place.

I only vaguely remembered the castle from our visit there for my grandfather’s funeral and my uncle’s coronation; I had been very young and had spent almost all my time on that trip with my nursemaid. The other cousins attending the ceremonies were either several years older than I and not housed in the nursery wing, or younger than I and also attended by nursemaids for the duration of our stay, which was



quite brief. The occasion was a solemn one fraught with ceremony—a long and sad royal funeral and an even longer coronation—so there was a certain restraint to the behavior of all present. The only other time I had met my uncle had been at my own mother's funeral, and like everyone else, he had been mournful and respectful.

Hence I was somewhat distressed to find that my uncle is, in fact, a deplorably dedicated practical joker and that his son, Crown Prince Escobar, is a ten-year-old chip off the old block. My uncle has a garden of grotesques. Vast statues of monsters of all kinds are mounted on wheels and hidden tracks. At a signal from my uncle, a concealed servant operates a series of pulleys that cause the monsters to come to life and chase down unwary walkers. The garden also features hidden fountains; while running from the monsters, the unsuspecting victims are drenched by sudden eruptions of water. My uncle howls in delight at the fun of it all. Escobar is more limited in the scope of his jokes, but he is always expanding them, from putting frogs in empty chamber pots to startle people already in humble positions to jumping out from behind doors or curtains at the most inopportune moments.

My uncle's wife, Queen Schwanhilde, does not share his jovial demeanor.

Instead, she presents a countenance so downcast that she appears to be in a continual stare of grief. She spends her days working on an enormous tapestry. She has been working on it for well nigh eleven years and is not more than halfway done. The subject matter of the tapestry may somewhat explain her doleful appearance; it consists of various hunting scenes, all of them (so far) gruesome and bloody. I shuddered every time I went in the same room with the thing.

As if the king's immediate family were not bad enough, many ancillary members of the extended family—which I unfortunately share—also reside in the castle. The mere fact that I am able to say they are my relatives without violent fits of despair demonstrates that

I have, in large part, recovered from the thankfully brief time that I spent with them.

Among the embarrassing female relations, I met at last Great-Aunt Alfonsine, who had contributed “Moufflette” to my official christening name. The beloved Moufflette the cat having “passed over,” as Great-Aunt Alfonsine phrased it, at the venerable age of fifteen, I was spared meeting that worthy animal, but I met and was regaled with the exploits of all seventeen of the felines who currently and most generously allowed Great-Aunt Alfonsine to share their suite on the top floor of the castle. Several of the current residents were directly descended from the aforementioned Moufflette, so I was introduced to my “little furry cousins” Baguette, Painbrun, Rouleau, and Beignet. I guessed that they were named for their favorite edibles, since all the cats were invited to the table at all meals served in Great-Aunt Alfonsine’s apartment. In general, I like cats, but I prefer them one or two at a time, not an entire pride en masse. One of my most hilarious memories of the time I spent in Wittenbach is the evening Nualla and I had dinner with my great-aunt and the cats.

Dwarfs do not keep house pets; Nualla was amazed first of all that anyone would have cats in a castle; that my great-aunt kept seventeen in her rooms was unfathomable to her. We arrived at the appointed hour and were met at the door by the maid and a black-and-white tom that was introduced to us as “the butler.” He took his duties seriously; he inspected every item of food and drink served and sampled several (to be sure they were fit for human consumption, I presumed). Nualla, being unused to cats in the house and more especially at the table, was engaged from the first moment in a running battle with a sly gray tabby who lurked near her chair and hooked fish, meat, bread, and fruit off her plate with the skill of a master pickpocket. She was engaged equally in a staring match with a long-haired white cat with one blue and one yellow eye. Great-Aunt Alfonsine was oblivious to both Nualla’s ongoing contests with the cats and my efforts to suppress the fits of giggles that threatened to erupt at the worst

possible moments, when the old lady was describing in detail the various funeral obsequies for her dearly departed former cats. Nualla finds the memory funny now, but she was a bit rattled by the time we finished our dinner that night.

If my elderly cat-loving relative could be passed over as merely eccentric, my Cousin Walberta and her three husband-hunting daughters—Engelberta, Norberta, and Fetiberta—could not. The “Bertas” were three of the silliest women I have ever known. They were not only abysmally foolish, but also vain, petty, and jealous of one another as well as every other single woman in the court. No sensible man would have come within range of either the sisters or their mother, who was growing desperate, for the girls were all older than I and not yet called for, much less spoken for. Nualla was fascinated by their appearances at the ball my uncle arranged to welcome me and introduce me to his court. Even the brief time required with the dressmaker who made mine and Nualla’s simple gowns had the dwarf girl fidgeting. By comparison to the Bertas, though, we might both have been wearing pillow slips. Their dresses were elaborate concoctions covered with laces, frills, ruffles, and tucks. They must have taken days just to drape, much less sew. A flock of tropical birds would not have looked more exotic or ridiculous in a hen coop.

As if the women were not bad enough, there were also the men of the court. That my uncle’s courtiers should make every effort to win my affections and my hand in marriage hardly came as a surprise. That they all so totally appalled me did not make the experience any more pleasant. The “gentlemen” (note that I place that word in quotes) ranged from the superannuated, toothless Count Bohort to the precocious Baron Giflet, only thirteen years old but already practicing hard at perfecting a lascivious leer and a whole catalogue of double entendre. By far the most ridiculous of the lot was Sir Bagdemagus, a fop of the first order. He spent so much time with his tailor, valet, and wig maker that I wondered how he had time to sleep at all, given that he was on hand at every court function

from beginning to end, never in the same clothes as on any previous occasion, and always with an elaborate wig. I suspected he was totally bald underneath the wigs. I was particularly fond of the lavender wig that lofted a good ten inches above his cranium. I say I was fond of it because I saw it attacked by Great-Aunt Alfonsine's cat Butler and doused in one of the hidden fountains in the gardens, and yet it made a successful reappearance at the ball. It matched the sleeve insets of Sir Bagdemagus's doublet that evening.

I know it is difficult to believe that these examples represent the norm, not the extremes of the members of my uncle's court. Unfortunately, these are only a few of many examples I could cite. My greatest worry at the time was that Nualla would think all human society was as insane as the segment found in my uncle's court. Fortunately, she seems to have sorted the wheat from the chaff fairly easily. Her assessment of the men was fairly typical. "Perhaps Forngal should send Rafe here after all," she mused one day. "We could easily rescue him from the prison, and chasing him would give these silly men useful employment and some needed exercise, while Rafe could easily elude the lot of them."

"We would scandalize the relatives, of course, breaking him out of jail," I laughed.

"Of course."

"The only danger would be that the Bertas might get there before us. And then Rafe would never forgive us!"

"That is true," she nodded solemnly. "I think it possible their mother would not scorn even an outlaw as a husband for one of the daughters."

"I can almost guarantee it," I laughed.

"Perhaps Rafe had better stay away, then."

"He certainly had!"

Nualla's only reply to that avowal was a knowing glance, and I felt myself blushing over my unconscious and unintended betrayal of just how possessive I felt about a man I would probably never see again.



## CHAPTER 10

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Nualla stayed with me for a month, until the annual November fair. Her clan, being longstanding friends of Wittenbach, always sent traders to the fair, so Nualla would travel home with them. I was sorry to see her go, but I could certainly understand why she was ready to leave. I found the absurdity of my relatives and the court in general bad enough; I knew her more serious and restrained dwarf sensibilities must be near the breaking point.

After she had gone back to the mountains, I feared that I was succumbing to the inevitable insanity of my uncle's court. I kept seeing things that were not possible. Correction: I kept seeing *one* thing. One face.

This unnerving phenomenon actually began happening during the fair itself. A juggler's familiar profile, seen out of the corner of my eye, gave me a start, but when I looked again, I saw his red hair and the freckles spread across his beardless face. A few days later when I returned through the town from a ride along the river, I saw him come out of a tavern. As he limped away from me, however, I noticed that the poor man had a crooked back and a twisted foot. A few days later, I saw him again, carrying logs into the wood yard at the castle itself, then realized that the woodcutter had the gray hair and stooped shoulders of an old man. I was truly in doubt of my sanity by the time the itinerant musician arrived.



Several wandering minstrels had visited the castle in the month I had been there. Despite all his faults, my uncle truly loved music and dancing and kept a cadre of musicians in his employ at all times. Those currently in residence did not include a singer, however, the last vocalist having left in the spring to seek his fortune on the open road once more. While instrumental music was adequate for dancing and to accompany even the least elaborate dinners in the great hall, people longed for special entertainment at banquets and other celebrations.

I learned from the Bertas that a new minstrel had arrived. Because of the rain one day, I was unable to go out riding, and I had declined the queen's invitation to bring my embroidery to the solar where she was working on the dreaded tapestry. I had used the same excuse—a slight headache—to decline Great-Aunt Alfonsine's invitation to sit with her; during rainy weather the cats were more restless and annoying than usual. Instead, I decided to go to the long gallery and study the portraits of my ancestors while I walked off some of my excess energy. I hadn't expected to find the Bertas there as I had seen the dressmakers on their way to the girls' apartment earlier; their fittings usually consumed hours. I would have ducked away, but one of them saw me, so my choices were either to join them or be extremely rude. I was too well brought up; I joined them in front of an ancestor in a lurid purple dress.

The reason for their presence in the portrait gallery was soon made clear; they were seeking inspiration for their gowns for the Christmas masquerade. The discussion of the ball made one of them—Fetiberta, I think, but I find it difficult to keep them separate in my mind—think of musicians.

"There's a new singer for tonight; I saw him in the gallery with the viol player. He's ever so attractive," she gushed. "Not that I would ever lower *myself* to marry a mere musician, of course, but he might do well enough for you, Engleberta. At *your* age, you can hardly afford to be too choosy."

Engleberta raised her chin and sniffed in disdain. "If you think him so attractive, you may pursue him, sister. I had rather die a spinster than marry beneath me."

"He could be a nobleman in disguise," the third sister suggested slyly. "An adventurous youth seeking a girl discerning enough to penetrate his masquerade and win his heart."

I doubted that, but I was cheered by the thought of a new singer. I needed some touch of normalcy to combat the incipient madness that life in the castle made me feel. I hoped this one had a decent voice at least; the last visiting singer had screeched like a peafowl on the high notes.

My uncle had ordered a banquet to celebrate the arrival of the new singer, who had apparently already played a private audition for him. I was not sure how many people would be in a fit state to appreciate the singer as we progressed through seven courses, each with different wines to complement the food. I drank abstemiously, but many of the men and some of the women were well on the way to stupor when my uncle finally waved to the gallery, where the musicians had sat and played throughout the elaborate meal. "Tomas, my good man, will you come now and favor us with a song?"

The new minstrel came tripping lightly down the steps into the hall. He made a colorful entrance, to say the least. His tunic was crimson, his hose yellow, and his shoes green, with long, curled toes. A large, floppy hat striped in all three colors covered his head and hung down the side of his face nearest me. He pranced to the center of the hall, bowed slightly to either side, then to my uncle in a sweeping move that brought his nose to about the level of his knees. As he stood erect once more, he brought his lute into position to play and struck a loud chord. In the hush that followed, he announced in ringing tones, "By your leave, Your Majesty, I will attempt to render for you the tale of Aloyce and Emmerick, the tragic lovers of ancient Ethuria."

I had just taken a sip of wine as he stood up. I nearly sprayed the table with it. Fortunately, everyone's attention was focused on the singer as he launched into the ballad.

A maiden fair was sweet Aloyce  
In Ethuria when the world was new.  
She wandered through the forest groves,  
Where sweetest flowers grew.

There came one day a-riding by  
The hunt in full array,  
Where brave and joyful Emmerick  
His colors did display.

I was not surprised that Rafe sang well; I had thought before that his voice had a musical quality. He played well too, again not surprising with his long, deft fingers. The ballad he had chosen was a long one, well known to most people in the court. It was a good choice for an audition piece, for completing the many verses would show he had stamina. He received enthusiastic applause as he dolefully finished the tragic tale. My uncle called "Bravo!" and signaled the wine steward to fill a cup for the singer. "Refresh yourself, Tomas! Will you give us another song, a new one?"

Rafe drained the cup and bowed again to my uncle. Strumming the lute and adjusting one of the tuning pegs, he said, "This song is not new to me, Majesty, but it may be so to your noble courtiers and fair ladies, for it comes from a distant land." He played a delicate ripple of notes before singing:

The raging sea has taken my love;  
She'll venture home no more.  
Her father swore to take her from me,  
Away to a distant shore.

I met my love upon the strand,  
Under the full moon's light.  
Our lips and hearts were joined then  
As we our troth did plight.

I had not heard the ballad before; it was, of course, a tale of love unending despite all the obstacles placed in the paths of the lovers. I was so enthralled by the story that I almost forgot Rafe was the singer—almost—except that somehow every word seemed to go straight to *my* heart.

He finished his performance with a comic romp about a foolish young lord who falls in with bad companions with hilarious results. Wiping tears of laughter from his eyes, my uncle offered “Tomas” a place at the court for an extended engagement.

“I am honored, Your Majesty,” Rafe bowed again. “Winter is a good time to be livin’ in a house with a roof that’s neither a tree nor the wide blue sky.”

“And we are delighted to have you here. Evard!” My uncle waved to the wine steward. “Another cup for our Tomas!”

I was naturally burning with curiosity, but several days passed before I had a chance to speak with Rafe alone. I had seen him watching me, but whenever we met in the halls or the solar of the castle, there were others present, and he was in all ways the proper servant to a royal patron. The Bertas were particularly guilty of being ever-present, just as Nualla and I had joked that they would be. He must have discovered that none of them rode, however, for when I went to the stables one morning, I found him haunting them, though he was ostensibly there to see to his horse, a somewhat nondescript beast of an odd yellowish brown hue, but with a gentle eye.

“Good mornin’, Highness,” he greeted me with a slight bow. “I’m told you often ride along the river. Would you do me the honor of lettin’ me escort you today? Sunbeam here is wantin’ a run.”



"Gladly, Tomas," I replied. "The boy my uncle assigned to ride with me usually lags behind in any case. I don't think he's really cut out to be a horseman."

"Well then, I'll just be saddlin' Sunbeam up while he gets your horse," he grinned. "He looks like a fine beast spoilin' for a race."

We rode sedately enough through the town, but when we reached the river road, we urged our horses to a canter, then a gallop, and the groom was far behind by the time we slowed them back to a walk.

Alone at last, I turned to him and demanded, "Are you out of your mind? You told me you were known here. What if you're recognized?"

He grinned at me. "Ah,'tis a wanderin' minstrel's prerogative to come and go as he will. If anyone starts askin' pressin' questions, I'll go wanderin' expediently."

"Why are you here, Rafe?"

"Why not here?" he replied with another grin. "I have to be somewhere. Do you want me to leave?"

"No, of course not. It's just—"

"Well then."

"I think you must be as insane as the rest of the people here to take such a risk."

"Some things are worth takin' a risk for, Kate. I'm willin' to take a chance or two." He gave me a look I couldn't interpret. "Don't be worryin' about me, darlin'."

"You *are* insane," I told him, but I smiled as I said it. "I didn't know you were a musician, though."

"I have a number o' useful talents."

"Like juggling?" I asked.

He laughed merrily. "I wondered if you'd recognize me with henna in my hair and spots on my face."

"How did you manage the crooked back and twisted foot? That day coming out of the tavern?"



"Ah, I wasn't expectin' you that day. I had to improvise, and in a hurry. Dropped one shoulder as low as I could, turned one foot in and dragged the other. And moved away from you."

"I thought I was losing my mind," I confessed. "I kept seeing you everywhere I went."

He chuckled, then said more seriously, "We need a way to spend time together alone. If you'd care to, I mean."

"I think you know the answer to that."

He smiled. "Do you sing? Play the lute?"

"I sing well enough for my own self. I play the lute a little. You could give me lessons."

"Aye. It's a good cover, as learning to play takes concentration and no interruptions. We could learn a duet or two, and you could sing with me in the hall."

"I'm nowhere near as good as that. *You* are."

"You're too kind, Highness," he replied formally, for we had turned back toward the town and met the groom, who fell in behind us. "It will be an honor to instruct you. I'll meet you, then, in the small solar, after the noonday meal."

"But I haven't a lute."

"I'll be sure to bring you one, then. I'm sure you'll prove an apt pupil, Princess."

I shouldn't have been surprised that in addition to having a good voice and skill at playing, Rafe was also clever at setting words to old tunes. That first afternoon, he sang a bit of a song he had made up: "The Three Foolish Princesses." I recognized the Bertas at once and laughed until I cried.

"You can't sing that in the hall!" I protested.

"You're right, o' course. You'd fall off your chair laughin' and no one would know why. I hate to say it, Kate, but your relations aren't the cleverest people I've ever met. How in perdition did you come out so bright?"

“I am much more my father’s child than my mother’s. I’ve always known that. Maman was good and kind and loving, and beautiful as well, but she was a bit frivolous. How else do you think I wound up being called Snow White?”

“I had wondered. You do have another name, don’t you? Somehow I can’t see your Bishop Benedict christening you just Snow White.”

I pulled out the medallion and turned it over so he could see the initials. “I have *lots* of other names. Katherine Anna Theresa Elizabeth Lucretia Ermintrude Moufflette Gisela Clarice.”

“Moufflette? What sort o’ name is *that*?”

“It’s ‘soft bread’ in some language or other,” I answered. I saw the wicked twinkle in his eye. “Don’t even *think* about calling me Moufflette. I’ll punch you in the nose like I did Ruegen when I was five.”

He was laughing so hard that we almost failed to hear the Bertas coming. However, he managed to beat a strategic retreat by telling them he was trying to compose a song in their honor. “For sure the hard part is knowin’ where to begin. I am but a poor minstrel unaccustomed to such fashionable and high-born ladies as yourselves. Findin’ the words to name your praises and rhyme at the same time is a challenge to my poor brain.”

If not for Rafe, I could not have stayed in Wittenbach through the winter. He made me laugh with the clever verses about the absurd members of the court that he made up only for me. He even taught me to play several songs on the lute, though the lessons were more a ruse than a serious endeavor. His regular accounts of the excuses he had to invent to elude the determined efforts of the Bertas to get him alone made me howl with laughter.

Rafe particularly enjoyed the game of hiding in plain sight in the heart of the court. Shaving off his beard and cutting his hair had, of course, changed his appearance, but he also wore the most outrageously flamboyant costumes he could put together. I was well aware that he was subtly mocking the Bertas and Sir Bagdemagus, and I thoroughly enjoyed the joke—and the fact that they never caught on.

I finally stopped trying to deny my own heart. I loved Rafe, and he made it clear in every smile, every contact of eye, and every touch of his hands guiding mine on the strings that he loved me too. What remained to be done before we were free to declare our love was to solve the problems that each of our fathers, though in different ways, presented. Rafe still had a price on his head, and late in the winter, I had a letter from my father demanding that I come home. Unaccountably, as I read that letter, a line from one of Rafe's ballads floated into my mind:

Her father swore to take her from me,  
Away to a distant shore.

I shivered as if someone had walked over my grave.

## CHAPTER 11

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Rafe read Father's letter and gave it back to me with a slight shrug. "He doesn't sound *too* angry."

"He's angry, all right. It's not so much in the words as the slant and heaviness of the script. I have to go. I don't dare disobey him."

"What would he do if you didn't?"

"Send troops, most likely. Drag me back and lock me in a tower."

"There are worse places," he said. "I'd not like to land in the dungeon."

"Nor would I, if there were a dungeon. Our castle is relatively new and dungeonless. Prisoners are kept in the old fortress on the other side of the lake from the castle. Including those locked in towers, come to think of it."

"Ah. Well, it could be a lot worse. Trust me, I know." We were sitting in the window embrasure in the small solar where we always had our music lessons. Rafe looked out the window and was silent for a long time. "It could be much worse."

"Rafe—will you tell me? What was it you and your father quarreled over?"

He kept looking out the window; his voice was very low and sad. "I wanted to come home. He wouldn't let me."

"Where were you then?"

"Coir Inis. I'd only come home for a short visit at Christmas, and I didn't want to go back. I'd been gone for five years, page and squire

in a foreign court. I felt I needed to be learnin' about my own country and how to rule it. I was to be crowned in a year, and I didn't know most of the people I'd be king over."

"But—your father's still alive—"

"My father's prince consort and regent, not king. My grandda was the king until I was eleven. I was his heir after my uncle died when I was three or so."

"Your mother is the queen, then?"

"My mother—" his voice broke. "My mother doesn't know me nor anyone else. The last time I saw her, she had four little dolls she called her children. She lost three babes after me, and it broke her mind. She hasn't known she's in this world since I was eight years old, nor called me by my own name a single time I've been with her in all that time."

My eyes swam in tears. I had never heard anyone sound more forlorn. "I'm so sorry, Rafe."

He gave me a sad little smile and then looked back out the window. "I'd been askin' to come home for four long years, ever since my grandda died, but my father—I think he just got a taste of power and found he liked it. My grandda had made him chancellor when my uncle died, and we moved to the capital to live. That was a good bit of power, o' course, controllin' all the money. By our laws, I couldn't rule in my own right until I was sixteen, so there had to be a regency council, and who more logical to be the head than my own father and the chancellor? My grandda trusted him completely. My father picked the rest of the regency council, and my grandda just signed the papers. He was ill by then; he'd hoped to see me grow up, but he was old, you know. My mother was more than ten years older than her brother, and Grandda wasn't young even when she was born. I'd been page for him for two years, but even he said I needed to go away to learn more about the world than just Adaintire. He sent me to Coir Inis, where my father's cousin was the master of the pages and squires. I'd been there a year already when he died, and I knew I had to go back after



the funeral, but every year after, I expected to come home. Father kept sayin' it was bad for me to be in a lower position than king in my own court, that my vassals wouldn't show me proper respect if they'd known me as an inferior."

"I've heard that argument before," I said. "A lot of kings send their sons away for an education."

"I know, and I wouldn't have minded if I hadn't had to stay all the time, but I was miserable there. My father's cousin made sure I had the worst duties and the harshest punishments for any breakin' o' the rules. He said it was so I wouldn't be weak and whinin', but after all that happened later, I've wondered if my father didn't put it in his mind."

"So you argued about your being sent away again. How did it come to your being banished and outlawed?"

"The banishment came first. We had argued and argued, the whole time I was home. He goaded me into shoutin' at him in a council meetin' one day, and the next he made slurs against my mother, poor soul, that they didn't hear. They were just in time to see me jump up and draw my dagger on him."

"Oh no!"

"Aye. There was a trial, o' sorts. They brought me before the whole court and asked for anyone who cared to speak in my defense. They didn't *know* me, Kate. My father had made sure of that by keepin' me away for five years. And the way everything was worded, he made it sound like I'd inherited my mother's madness. They all knew her, o' course. Not a single person would speak for me. So the decision was to banish me for three years, to give me 'time to mature, if possible,' and master my temper before the date of my coronation would be considered again. They took me straight from the court to a ship in the harbor, and by next mornin', I was set off on the mainland with naught but my sword, some clothes, and a bit o' money to buy a nag of a horse."

"But Rafe—you said he outlawed you."

“That happened after, when he couldn’t find the Coronation Cup. He knew damned well I didn’t have it with me when I left the castle, but he doesn’t know where I put it, so he told everyone I had stolen it, packed it in my baggage.”

“The Coronation Cup being vital to the coronation of the king, no doubt.”

“Aye. After speakin’ and signin’ the oath to serve and protect all the people of Adaintire, the new king takes Holy Communion before the actual crownin’. The archbishop blesses the cup and pours Communion wine into it from the cruet for the new king to drink as part of the ceremony. It’s been done the same way for the past three hundred years; no one on the island would think a coronation valid without the cup.”

“What did you do with it?”

“I put it in a place my grandda showed only to me, down in the crypt of the Chapel Royal, where all my ancestors are buried. He told me it was for a king’s most precious secrets, and he’d never told another living soul except my poor dead uncle where it was. I didn’t have many illusions left by the time my father had me confined to my rooms and the trial set. I knew I’d never get off the island if I snuck out o’ the castle, which I could easily have done. Instead, I snuck down to the chapel where the cup was kept and took it down to the crypt and hid it.”

“And so he outlawed you as a thief.”

“Aye. That didn’t come as much of a surprise to me. I hadn’t tarried where they put me ashore. I walked inland to the next town and found that nag of a horse, traded most o’ my clothes for a lute, and took to the road. I blessed the old man who’d taught me to play and the fact I had a fair voice and a good memory for verses.”

“So you really are a minstrel.”

“Aye. I traveled about for the first three years just barely keeping enough for a meal ahead. The trouble came when my father’s warrants reached the hands o’ the Kreller dwarfs. They knew the Coronation

Cup all too well, and they wanted it more than my father did. Durstig caught me once before, but he didn't chain me that time. I got away, and he'd been hunting me ever since. I'd been hiding in the forest for nearly three years when Ulf's hounds treed me, and he sent news to Durstig that he had his prize for him."

"The Krellerin meant to kill you, though."

"Not until they'd tortured the truth out o' me. It was a situation they could not fail to win. Not very many people can endure slow torture to the point o' death. I don't think I could. They'd learn where the cup was, and they'd get a reward for my death as well."

"Surely not!"

"Not officially, maybe, but I'm sure my father would like me to die in exile." He was silent again. "And if I did, I doubt my mother would live a month. He'd want to get himself an heir with no taint o' the 'MacHanlan madness' in him."

"Would they actually let him take the throne?"

"I can't imagine why not, Kate. He's been the ruler in fact for over ten years now. He signs everything in my name, o' course, but everyone knows I've no part in rulin'."

"Is there no one you could call on as an ally? Someone who knows the truth?"

"Not a soul this side o' Heaven, darlin'," he said sadly. "Do you think I've not wanted to go back?"

"No, of course you have, Rafe. Is Rafe really your name?"

He smiled a bit. "Like yours, it's part of it. I haven't quite so many to choose from. Andrew Rafael Daniel Tomas MacHanlan. My grandda was Andrew and my uncle that died was Tomas. My grandda called me Rafe for his own father, and Rafael was to be my official name once I was crowned."

"I'm sorry you've been so hurt, Rafe. But I'm glad you told me."

He gave me a very direct look. "I am, too. I haven't known anyone in a long time I could trust to keep my secrets."

"Will you come with me to my father's court? He'd believe you."

“Would he? I doubt it. My father’s made sure to spread the tales of my mother’s madness and my own thievin’ to every court on the continent by now.”

“He’d listen to you, at least.”

“I don’t dare risk it, Kate. There’s been other lies told on me as well; you know how rumor runs. I’m supposed to have been thievin’ and seducin’ girls right and left these five years and more. Ask any courtier in a dozen countries and you can hear the tale of Mad MacHanlan sneakin’ in with the girls and out with the silver. I told you I wasn’t unknown in Wittenbach. I made my way here durin’ the second year o’ my exile, and I was livin’ all right, ‘til some merchant who’d been tradin’ in the islands recognized me and told the rumors he’d heard about me there. I had to run for it or land in your uncle’s dungeon awaitin’ deportation back to my father.” His tone was bitter as he continued, “You’d think banishment and outlawry would be enough, but my father’s determined to see me dead or imprisoned for the rest o’ my life one or the other.” He sighed deeply. “No, Kate, I can’t risk lettin’ your father know who I really am. But I can take Schilling home for you and see you make it safe home before I leave.”

“Leave? But where—?”

“I need to go home, Kate. If I can’t clear my name, I can never ask you to share it, now can I? And I love you, Kate. You know I do.”

“It’s so dangerous, Rafe.”

“Aye, well—” He smiled slightly. “I told you once before some things are worth a risk. I reckon this is one o’ those things.”

My uncle, who had also had a letter from my father asking him to send me home, arranged for a ship. Rafe left before I did, having told my uncle that he was, after all, a wandering minstrel, and his feet were willing to carry him westward to my father’s kingdom to deliver my horse and perhaps pick up a new song or two.

I wrote to Nualla and begged her to come and sail with me. “For otherwise,” I wrote, “I will have to take the Bertas along, and I am sure I would either jump overboard in two days’ time or push them

over and so go home to my father either drowned or in chains.” To my great relief, Nualla arrived back in Wittenbach two days before the ship sailed, so we boarded it together for my homeward journey. I have to admit that I worried more about Rafe and his shorter but more dangerous route along the new forest highway than I did about how my father was likely to receive me.



## CHAPTER 12

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My father was waiting on the quay when the ship docked. He was somberly dressed in dark blue tunic and hose. His dark hair was a bit longer than I had last seen it; he had kept it short while the campaign in Dansine was ongoing. His eyes, when they met mine, were darkly opaque, not the warm brown I had hoped but not really expected to see. He was perfectly courteous to Nualla, of course. He was also perfectly courteous to me. Exactly as he was to her. There was no kiss, not even a hug to welcome me home. I felt as though I had walked into an ice house. The carriage ride of some three hours from the seaport to the castle was as neutral as his greeting had been. He pointed out the features of the landscape to Nualla as we went and chatted with her about the various works her clan had undertaken for the kingdom in the past. He inquired of me only about the health and doings of my uncle's family and court. I grew more miserable by the moment. The cold-shoulder treatment indicated his anger more than a scolding or even a harangue would do. I dreaded what I knew would be the next stage.

Mercifully or not, I did not have long to wait once we reached the castle. Father only gave me time to see Nualla settled before he summoned me to his study. He dismissed the footman who had fetched me by thanking him and adding, "Please close the door and remain outside, Selwyn. We do not wish to be disturbed."

I was fairly sure I would have welcomed an interruption, but I didn't say so. I walked slowly to the chair my father indicated and sat. An immediate and impassioned scolding would have been welcome compared to the cold regard Father leveled at me for what seemed like an hour for every second it lasted. His early training to meet people's eyes held all too well; I endured his icy stare for as long as I could, but I finally dropped my eyes. "I'm sorry, Father."

"Well, that is better than nothing, Katherine," he said (Father began calling me Katherine after my mother died). "Not much better, but at least it signals that you realize your own responsibility in what you have done." I chanced a glance at him but quickly dropped my eyes again. The frown on his grave face made him look carved in stone. He went on in a tone that matched the hardness of his face. "I am gravely disappointed in your indecorous behavior, Katherine, and I require from you an explanation of what prompted it. Begin, please."

I swallowed hard. My throat felt dry, and my heart thumped like a rock in my chest. "I didn't want to marry Prince Hubert, Father. He was due to arrive in a day or two."

"Katherine, you are most certainly aware that no such marriage could have taken place without either my knowledge or my consent. You cannot seriously imagine I would have approved of such a match, given Hubert's reputation."

"I was afraid you would be forced to, if he—"

"I assume you mean that you feared for your virtue? I cannot fault your logic for that fear, certainly, but the forest, Katherine is not the refuge you should have sought. It is less than five miles to the Convent of St. Anne. You know full well that the abbess is your distant cousin and would assuredly have given you sanctuary until I arrived to set matters aright."

"I—didn't think of the convent, Father. I was going to Uncle Escanor."

"It is obvious that you did not think. Instead of seeking the ample protection of the convent, you chose to ride alone into the Dark

Forest. I am deeply ashamed of you, Katherine. I am appalled that your education to this point has not produced even a modicum of the decorum demanded of a royal princess.”

“I’m sorry, Father.” I was feeling fairly miserable, and the worst, I knew, was yet to come. So far Father had outlined my misbehavior; he hadn’t mentioned punishment, but I had no doubt he was about to do just that. I was all too right.

“I hold myself at least partially culpable in this debacle, Katherine, but you are not going to get off without any repercussions to yourself. I am aware that Lady Wilfride has not been an adequate governess for you. Had I actually been in residence rather than on campaign most of the past three years, I would have remedied the situation before this. I am doing so now. I am giving you a week’s respite, until your friend Nualla departs with her kin en route to Dansine, but after that time, you will have a new governess, and you will not find her so easy on you as Lady Wilfride has been.”

I relaxed a little. A new governess was not so bad. I should have known that was not all.

“Furthermore,” Father continued relentlessly, “while I am aware that you resent Caledonia and have suffered from some jealousy on her part, she is still the queen, and you owe her the courtesy and respect due her rank and position in this court. You placed her in an untenable position by making such an ill-advised decision as to ride alone into the Dark Forest, placing yourself in far more danger than you would have been in this house, and certainly more than you would have been in at the convent.” He paused for effect. “You also placed the court as a whole in a position of embarrassment, by behaving like a spoilt child instead of a royal princess with a loving and supportive staff. You will apologize to the queen and to the court as a whole, Katherine, at dinner tonight. In the future, you will conduct yourself with the dignity and reserve needed to set an example of nobility to the court and the kingdom at large, not to mention your own chances for a good marriage. Have I made myself clear, Katherine?”

“Yes, Father. Perfectly clear,” I swallowed.

“Good. I suggest you employ your time this afternoon composing and practicing your apologies. You are dismissed until dinner.”

I managed to leave the room at a decorous walk, chin up, and to round the corner out of Selwyn’s sight before I broke and ran, tears streaming down my face, breath coming in gasps. I didn’t even see Rafe until I ran right into him just outside the musician’s gallery in the second-floor corridor.

He caught me by the shoulders and drew me into the gallery, deserted at that hour, as was the hall below. “Kate, darlin’, what is it?”

I threw my arms around his neck and sobbed against his shoulder. I hadn’t cried like that since my mother died, but I couldn’t seem to stop the tears. Rafe just held me until the sobs subsided, murmuring comforting words and stroking my hair. I wasn’t even aware that he had guided me to a bench and sat holding me until I sat back from him. “I’m sorry, Rafe. I’ve gotten your tunic all wet with my weeping.”

“The tunic doesn’t matter, darlin’. Whatever’s the matter?”

“F-F-Father. He’s so angry with me. No, he’s *disappointed* in me. I’ve never had such a humbling interview. It would have been easier to bear a beating than his disapproval.”

“Well, you knew he was angry when you got the letter,” Rafe said reasonably.

“Yes, but—oh, Rafe, it was *awful*. I-I have to apologize to the queen and the whole court for my misbehavior. At dinner tonight.”

“Well, but that’s not so bad, Kate.”

“And I have to have a new governess, as soon as Nualla leaves with her kin for Dansine.”

“You might have expected some such, Kate. It could be a lot worse.”

Chagrined, I realized just how much worse; Rafe had been not only tried and found guilty before his whole court, but banished and later outlawed. I had nothing to complain about, really. “You’re right, of



course. It could be. You're still here!" I suddenly realized. I felt better and must have sounded it.

"Only for the night, Kate. I told you I wanted to be sure you were safe home before I left. Your father's allowing me to sing at the banquet welcoming you home, but I'm off in the mornin'." He touched my cheek with one finger. "It's just as well, you know. I doubt the new governess would let you have music lessons alone with me, anyhow. And I really do need to go home and see if there's any way to settle my troubles short o' patricide."

I wasn't feeling particularly good about the prospect of making a public apology in the hall that night, but I figured I had better get it over with while I had at least two people—Nualla and Rafe—there to support me in my misery. Nualla was seated beside me, of course, and she gave my hand a squeeze as I stood and moved toward my father.

"Sire," I said with as graceful a curtsy as I could manage.

"Princess," he replied formally, nodding gravely. "We are pleased to welcome you home."

"And I am glad to be here. I would speak, please, with the queen and the court."

He nodded again and stood to address the court. The hall hushed to a silence as deep as a church. "The Princess Snow White would speak with you all." He gestured to me and sat down.

I was shaking slightly; this was not something I wanted to do at all. My mouth was as dry as goose down, and my stomach clenched in a hard knot. Then I heard a tiny ping from a harp and looked up to see Rafe in the gallery above the dais. He gave me a tiny smile and a thumbs-up signal. I raised my chin. He had endured so much worse than what I had to do; I could not shame myself further in front of him by stumbling through my apology.

"Your Majesty," I curtsied to the queen. "I must first offer to you my deepest regrets for my precipitate flight from this castle. It was both rash and rude to cause you such distress, and I hope you will forgive me and allow me a chance to redeem myself in your eyes."



Caledonia inclined her head, indicating that she had received my apology, so I turned to the rest of the court seated at the lower tables. "My lords and ladies," I curtsied again, "I would also ask your forgiveness for my immature and ill-considered behavior in leaving this court so suddenly and without notifying anyone of my destination. I will in future endeavor always to present to the world the decorum you have a right to expect from your royal family."

I had managed to make it through the speeches without faltering; I looked back at my father, who nodded and waved me back to my seat. I was shaking but surviving. I would much have preferred to retreat from the table and secret myself away from the eyes of the court, but I'd just promised to display decorum, so even if my father would have excused me, I could hardly break my word immediately. Besides, I wanted to hear Rafe; I had already missed him in the weeks we had been apart on our separate journeys here; I knew I would miss him even more after tonight when I would have no way of knowing when or even if I might see him again.

The banquet was not nearly so long and elaborate as those in Wittenbach; my father deplores unnecessary frivolity, so the time for the entertainment arrived fairly soon.

Father nodded to the gallery, and Rafe descended into the hall with nothing like the spectacular entrance he had always affected in Wittenbach. He was soberly clad in dark green doublet and hose and carried both a lute and a harp that evening. I had never heard him play the harp, although he had mentioned learning his first music on that instrument. He set it down on a stool, however, and first pulled his lute into his arms to play.

He sang two ballads, well known and well received. He also sang the one from the Island Kingdoms about the lovers separated by the girl's father. Then he smiled at me and bowed. "My next song was selected long before this evening, Princess, so I beg you will not think I am mocking you. It is not intended to sting you at all, but is merely a

foolish piece to make you smile.” And he launched into the verses he had composed to an old tune, singing:

A tale I'll tell of princesses three  
Who wanted to be wed,  
And so all pursued a likely lad;  
I know, for that lad was me.

I could not help but laugh, because I knew exactly whom the verses depicted and recalled most of the incidents specifically. He had embellished only a little on the foolishness of the Bertas in the song. I had heard all of the verses separately as he made them up, but the whole taken together was just too funny. I had tears in my eyes from laughter before he finished with a flourish.

Thus ended my time with the princesses three  
Who still are husbands seeking.  
So, men, beware or you'll be caught  
And not escape like me.

The whole court was applauding and laughing, so Rafe had time for a cup of wine and a change of instruments before his final song. He had picked up the harp and sat with it, running his fingers over the strings with skill as he tuned it to his satisfaction. “I will sing one further song for you tonight, and it is in appreciation for the welcome I have had here. Not all courts are so gracious to a wanderin’ minstrel, and I feel honored to have been so well received. Wandering is my fate, when the summer is here and the road is fair, so I am off in the mornin’ to seek my future on the way. But know that I go with this song in my heart, and the great hope that it will be my good fortune to return.”

I had not heard the song before; the words were haunting, as was the harp’s accompaniment.

When the shadows of the evening fall,  
When the watches of the night grow long,  
When silver moon and stars shine on all,  
I'll think of you and wish you well;  
I'll carry you always in my heart;  
I'll remember you in my song.

When morning breaks through trails of gray,  
When sunlight dapples all around,  
When rain and wind make forests sway,  
I'll think of you and bless your name;  
I'll cherish all our hours together;  
I'll hear in mem'ry your laughter sound.

When I grow weary on my way,  
When I lose heart for what I do,  
When I fear to face the day,  
I'll feel your strong and steady heart;  
I'll know your door is open still,  
And I'll be turning home to you.

I knew mine weren't the only tear-filled eyes in the hall, but I also knew, as surely as I knew my own name, that the song was not old, but new, and that it was really meant for just one person.

## CHAPTER 13

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My respite ended, as Father had said, with Nualla's departure. Just a week after I arrived home, a large party of her kin arrived from the south, traveling to Dansine. Caledonia's brother, having at last ended his border dispute, had engaged the dwarfs to repair and extend the wall that marked the northern border of Dansine. There were several women in the group of dwarfs; as in the armed camps, the women would handle the domestic chores, leaving the men more time to do the stonework. I was sorry to see Nualla go, even though I had known these arrangements since she had arrived in Wittenbach to accompany me home.

Father and Caledonia were following the dwarfs to Dansine; the queen had not seen her family since her marriage to Father, so they would attend a family wedding before making a leisurely trip home, progressing through a couple of other northern kingdoms and then through our own before returning home in the fall. Lady Wilfride was going along to Dansine, where she would stay with her sister, not returning to our realm. Even Caledonia had at last grown tired of her endless and useless potions, and there was practically a festive air among the housemaids when the news spread that Lady Wilfride would not be back.

The day before Father left, he summoned me to his study to meet my new governess, Lady Kunigunde. She was imposing, to say the

least. Half a head taller than my father, who is not a small man, she reminded me at once of the huge, sturdy horses that draw the heavy beer wagon from the brewery near the lake to the several taverns which it supplies in and around the capital. As broad as she was tall, Lady Kunigunde's face was long and somewhat rectangular, like the faces of the horses. I got the impression that she did not anger easily but that, if she were angry, she could inflict a great deal of damage without trying very hard.

Father made it *abundantly* clear that he expected me to obey Lady Kunigunde in every detail. He gave her an itinerary of his planned journey and told her he expected to receive regular reports on my progress, or lack thereof, in all my studies, from the practicalities of running an efficient household through academic studies in languages and history to the refinements of religious devotion, needlework, riding, dancing, and music. His tone made me certain that if I did not make adequate progress, I would be very, very sorry when he returned home.

And so, in early May, I was left alone with the castle staff and Lady Kunigunde, who was very unlike Lady Wilfride in other significant ways than appearance. For one thing, she was virtually omnipresent. The only times in the day when I was not with her were when I was either bathing or sleeping. She was an early riser, so I became one as well—not by my choice, but from her voice assaulting my ears to “Get up and be about the day!!”

I need to explain about Lady Kunigunde's exclamations. Everything she said sounded like it was followed by several exclamation points. Her voice matched her large body. I really don't think she realized she was speaking in a parade-ground roar, since everything from “Please pass the salt!!” to “Your hair looks nice in those braids!!!” was pronounced in the same booming tone that made the crystal ring and the windows rattle.

Every day began with riding; Lady Kunigunde believed in a nice, early ride regardless of the weather; she was a great believer in the



efficacy of fresh air. Fortunately it was summer, so the worst I had to endure in terms of bad weather were a few wet days when we rode in the pouring rain. Happily, Lady Kunigunde did not believe in the sidesaddle; being an excellent but very large horsewoman, she knew that the sidesaddle is far more likely to cause falls than a regular riding saddle. My riding was already good, but just keeping up with Lady Kunigunde's Amazonian efforts forced both me and Schilling to new heights of expertise. Fortunately, this was one area of my education that had not suffered unduly from Lady Wilfride; I had learned to ride among the boys and was fairly daring on horseback, and Lady Kunigunde approved. Following our ride, I had time for a bath and then the process generally known as "toilette." Lady Kunigunde supervised this daily. It involved choosing my clothes for the day and having my hair arranged to her satisfaction. We then went to Mass before finally having breakfast. Then the real work began.

Learning to manage a household involved meeting daily with the senior staff—cook, housekeeper, butler, stable master, and gardener. They all cringed when the governess spoke, or shouted, rather. The poor butler was the worst; one day when he was unaware of her presence (how he missed her I can't imagine, though he has been known to take a drop or two too much at times), he jumped as if he'd been struck by lightning when she boomed out "Give us a taste of the red, Emil!!!" The bottle of wine in his hands shot across the room and shattered on the wall by the fireplace. Poor Emil was as white as a ghost as he mopped up the wine that, unfortunately, had already stained the rug in quite a large circle. Such incidents aside, I learned the senior servants' duties and what they expected from the mistress of the house. I kept the household accounts and learned the names, status, duties, and habits of the entire staff working under these chief servants. Since ours was not a huge staff, this did not really take much time; I knew most of the servants by name anyway.

I also had to deal with the craftsmen who supplied the castle with everything from candles to foodstuff to silverware. Lady Kunigunde

and I went into the town most days of the week during the morning, and I placed the orders for the things the housekeeper, cook, and butler had told me were needed. It was time-consuming and not a little tedious, except when we visited the crystal shop. After our first visit, when three delicate-stemmed goblets shattered during Lady Kunigunde's discussion of prices with the master craftsman, our arrival always produced a flurry of activity as apprentices scurried to pack away any piece of glass not at least as thick as my finger. I sometimes wondered when or if I would need the skills I was learning; I knew very well that Caledonia did not handle the details of household management personally, but that was beside the point. My father had let Lady Kunigunde make out my course of study, and domestic management was a large part of that curriculum.

Afternoons were for academic studies in history and languages. Hearing Lady Kunigunde booming out in the Slavic languages was truly horrendous. They sound relatively bad at any volume, but in hers they were unbelievable. At least when Lady Kunigunde learned that I was fairly good at both languages and history, she adjusted her selections for reading to more specific volumes than she had intended. That is how it happened that I began reading about both Adainttire and Coir Inis and learning the musical language of the Island Kingdoms of which they are a part. This suited me very well indeed because it allowed me to think of Rafe quite frequently, a thing I did anyway. Finally, in the late afternoon, I did needlework and had dancing lessons, partnered by one of the two squires left in the castle for the summer. Music lessons followed with old Ludger, who had begun to teach me on the lute before my mother died. He was suitably impressed with the improvement I had made under "Tomas's" teaching while in Wittenbach and continued teaching me more of the traditional ballads and songs. Ludger was a good musician and longsuffering that summer as he tried to teach over Lady Kunigunde's loud and desperately off-key singing. I need not even say these lessons were not nearly so enjoyable as those with Rafe had been.

Need I say that the summer that year felt very long and tiring? The pattern of my days varied almost not at all. The exceptions occurred on Saturday, when music was replaced by a trip to the church for confession, and Sunday, when there was no riding before High Mass. Sunday afternoon was devoted to letter writing. I dutifully wrote to Father and Great-Aunt Alfonsine and the Bertas (this at Lady Kunigunde's insistence, of course). I also wrote to Nualla in Dansine. I wrote to Rafe as well, but those letters I could not send with a rider the next day as I did the others. Rafe's letters went into the secret compartment in my desk where I had always hidden my most treasured things. Every time I opened it, I thought of Rafe hiding the Coronation Cup in the place his grandfather had shown him in the royal crypt.

Few events worthy of much description intruded onto the humdrum daily routine. Father wrote back that the progress was going quite well but that he was looking forward to being home and intended to teach me chess when he returned. I took this to mean that Lady Kunigunde had reported that I was making good progress in my other studies and so had earned a modicum of approval. Dull as that sounds, it was almost as much excitement as I had to celebrate during the long summer.

Father and Caledonia returned in the fall with a larger retinue than had gone with them when they left. They seemed to have been collecting people all along the way. The arrival two days before theirs of a large number of servants with baggage had been the prelude to a frenzy of activity. A letter from Father carried by one of the servants warned me that about half the nobility in the realm, many of whom seldom came to court at all, and several from other kingdoms were either accompanying them or would be arriving within a few days of their return. I got an opportunity to practice my household management skills on a very real problem—where in the world were we going to put all those people, and how were we going to manage to feed them?

Father and Caledonia arrived with Baron Otto von Kurtzheim and his son Ruegen, my cousin and childhood playmate. Ruegen had long since outgrown his lisp and was a remarkably good-looking young man despite the curly auburn hair and the sprinkle of freckles on his nose that gave him an eternally boyish countenance. I had not seen Ruegen in a good while; he had gone home from court not long after Father remarried, and he'd spent the subsequent summers on campaign with Father and the winters serving as the ears of his almost totally deaf father. He looked a bit harried when he came into the hall attempting to get Baron Otto to stop shouting about the horses.

"Tell them not to forget to rub the gray down well, Ruegen!" the old man yelled.

"I did, Papa!" Ruegen shouted back.

"Of course it's a good idea! I said so, didn't I?"

"Hello, Ruegen," I said, giving him a hug. "You know the rooms I saved for you, the same as always."

"Hullo, Kate." He returned my hug, shouting to Baron Otto, "*Papa, it's Kate!*"

"No, we're not late! His Majesty only just arrived!"

"Hello, Uncle! Welcome back to court!" I said, hugging him.

"Well, child, you can't help being short," he responded. "Come along, son. I want some food!"

Ruegen rolled his eyes and shrugged. "I'll see you later, Kate. Some place quiet, all right?" His voice was a bit hoarse, as if from overuse.

As Baron Otto had said, Father had only just arrived, and he gave me a small hug as well. "You seem to be coping, Katherine. Tell Lady Helga what you've already arranged. Let her handle it, and come to the study in half an hour so we can talk."

Lady Helga was Caledonia's chief lady in waiting, and it was she, not the queen, who actually handled the running of the household. I was more than happy to put everything in her competent hands. She told me I had done a good job for not being aware who couldn't get along with whom. "Oh, this will not do, dear. Lady Fritzgow and Lady



Urusuline cannot be on the same hall; they hate one another. Don't fret, dear, I'll fix things. There was no way you could have known."

Father was still looking a bit disheveled from his ride, and he waved at his laden desk. "I have to read all of this soon, but I wanted to talk to you first, Katherine. You look well. Are you?"

"I'm well enough, Father, and you?"

"Feeling a bit overwhelmed by all the guests already, I fear. You know I deplore ceremony and folderol."

"Father, why in the world are all these people coming here?" I asked. "I mean, I know Michaelmas Court is coming up, but that only explains our own nobles, or at least some of them. What about the others?"

"Surely you know, Katherine. They're here for your birthday ball."

"Birthday ball," I repeated rather stupidly. "I'm having a birthday ball?"

"Well, of course you are, Katherine! You are a royal princess. You will be sixteen in a little under a month, and this ball was set long before you foolishly ran away last year. Your mother herself invited most of these people, before she died." He rummaged on his desk for a moment and then handed me a list of names that was pages long. "This is the official guest list."

"Oh," I said. I could think of nothing else to say. I knew the purpose of the ball: to allow all the eligible bachelors who could wrangle an invitation to come and try to win my hand. I perused the list curiously; on the third page, I had found the name "Prince Andrew Rafael Daniel Tomas MacHanlan of Adainttire." I felt my heart skip a beat. "Surely they won't all come?" I asked tentatively.

"Well, most likely not. Some are probably married or dead by now. A few may have heard of your exploits and will not consider you a fit match. But this is the list your mother made when you were about ten or so. Caledonia added a few of her relatives and connections, and the invitations were sent out a good two years ago, travel being what it is. Please don't tell me you did not know this, Katherine."



"It must have slipped my mind, Father. Rather a lot has happened," I said faintly.

"Um, I suppose so. In any case, I do have some news you will like. Your friend Nualla will be here soon," Father went on. "I have engaged the dwarfs to repair the foundations on the old east wing of the castle so we can safely use those rooms again."

"That's wonderful news!" I exclaimed, but his next words were like cold water in my face.

"Your cousins from Wittenbach are also coming."

"The Bertas? Here?" The thought was absolutely appalling.

"They are your cousins, my dear Katherine, and it was your choice to visit that court for the entire winter. You can hardly omit them from the guest list."

"Of course, Father," I agreed. "Do you have other good news as well? Fire, flood, famine—"

"Really, Katherine."

"Sorry, Father. Perhaps Nualla will balance out the Bertas. I should go help Lady Helga, Father. She may have rebellion in the ranks when the butler and housekeeper realize how many more servants they're going to have to hire for this ball."

"I am so glad you are taking this responsibility well, Katherine. I'm certain you are finding this more enjoyable than running off into the forest."

I just inclined my head as if in acceptance. How could I tell my father that the first thing that had sprung to my mind when he mentioned the ball and the Bertas together was whether, with all these people in the castle, I could possibly sneak out with Nualla and go hide in the mountains?

## CHAPTER 14

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Over the next several days, more and more people arrived at court. Not all could possibly be accommodated in the castle, of course, even though Lady Helga filled every room. Most of the better inns had reason to celebrate my birthday; they were filled to overflowing with people we could not squeeze into the castle, mostly lesser nobles from various countries. Many of our own nobles had houses in the town or nearby, too, and many took in relatives or other guests. I could never recall any time when court had been so busy and so exhausting.

Being polite to all and sundry was part of the job description of a royal princess. The strain of those days certainly would tell whether I was up to the task. I smiled so much I thought my face would break. Almost every evening, there was either a formal banquet in the great hall, where I had to sit with whatever prince or other luminary had arrived that day, or there were less formal but more unnerving smaller suppers. I say unnerving because the gentlemen invited to these more intimate dinners were the ones my father or Caledonia thought were the better candidates for my bridegroom. I wished I were back in the forest with Rafe or in the armed camp of the Grenzlerin dwarfs. I daydreamed of the halcyon days when I was alone with Lady Kunigunde. I even longed for the arrival of the Bertas, to draw off some of my suitors. That was when I knew I must be sliding into the abyss of madness once and for all.

Almost all the incidents I care to recall from that period involve my cousin Ruegen. Once Lady Helga took over the housekeeping, my moorings were free after Mass, and I usually sought out my cousin. We are not actually close in terms of kinship; Ruegen's mother had been my paternal grandmother's much younger first cousin. But she had also been my own mother's favorite lady in waiting, and so had spent a great deal of time at court from the time Ruegen was very small. Though he is two years my senior, we had virtually grown up together.

Ruegen had been with my father on campaign and knew a great many of the people coming to court much better than I did. I generally enjoyed his pungent comments about these people. He helped me keep my perspective on the whole ludicrous situation by telling me all the gossip that was behind the various alliances and feuds between certain ladies of the court and all the rumors about the various high-born lords coming to vie for my hand. The more I listened, the more I realized that my uncle's court did not have a monopoly on absurdity at all.

"There are the odious Balinciardi twins," he informed me. "They were part of the King of Dansine's household when we were on campaign. Baldessare and Anistagio. Their favorite pastime was throwing dice with anyone foolish enough to play with them. After they won all the money the unlucky lad had, they would gamble for duty. I don't think either of them so much as did sentry duty for two seasons running."

"What charming fellows!" I laughed.

"Then there is Baron von Hentzau. He has three wives in three different castles, I've heard."

"How is that possible?" I protested.

"None of them really cares, because they can't, any of them, stand to be with him above a few days at a time, thanks to his charming personal habits, which include bathing once a year whether he needs it or not."

“You’re making this up,” I accused him.

“I’m not that inventive, Kate. Oh yes, that fellow with the long curls and the high heels is Comte d’Archimbaud. He has nine sisters who have already scared away four prospective brides. He’s getting desperate to find someone who can abide his sisters’ bickering.”

“Ruegen! Don’t be such a rumor monger.”

“All right. Certain knowledge, then. That’s the Duke of Jenar from somewhere in the Island Kingdoms. He’s on the continent because he’s mortgaged the family estates to pay his gambling debts. He’s looking for any match that will pay him a dowry big enough to pay off the mortgage.”

“You are just full of good reviews, Ruegen. Is there a decent candidate among them?”

“Probably, but if so, he’s not one of the ones I’ve met or heard of. Shall I tell you more about them?”

“No, stop. I don’t want to hear any more at all. I have to be civil to them all.”

“You’ll be sorry.”

“I’m already sorry. Go away, Ruegen.”

Most of the time, however, I preferred Ruegen’s company to that of anyone else in the castle. As youngsters, even after he became a page and later a squire, we had spent hours every day in one another’s company. We had always had secret hiding places from all the servants and our mothers, and it was in these that we met to escape the chaos of the crowded court.

A week or so after the castle began to fill up, I found Ruegen in the orchard up “our” tree—a huge old apple tree with sturdy branches that were easy to climb and sit on, and still heavy foliage, despite the lateness of the season, that hid us from casual observers. Ruegen was sitting in the tree astride a branch, his back to the bole and a book in his hands. He gave me a hand up but said sourly, “Kate, I ought to throttle you.”

“What are you talking about? What did I do?”

"What did you do? You introduced that drill sergeant governess of yours to Papa. Does she *always* shout like that?"

"Absolutely," I said drily. "She and your father are a perfect match."

"God forbid," he said fervently.

"But they *are*, Ruegen! He can hear every word she says."

"Well, I can't hear myself think, and what if they should get married? There won't be a window left in the castle a month after she arrives to add her bellows to his!"

He sounded so serious about the possibility of that match that I had to laugh. "Don't worry, Ruegen, you can come stay at court."

"Only if you promise to stay as well, Kate. It's no fun when you're away. I was seriously put out that you ran away before I got here last winter."

"I refuse to apologize again. I've done my penance. I am doing it right now. Another one of those unspeakable Slavs is arriving today, and I shall have to sit with him at dinner."

"Unspeakable? Are they so bad?"

"Well, unpronounceable, anyway. How can anyone pronounce a name that consists only of eight consonants with one vowel at the very end? And they all call each other different names, depending on how they are related to one another. Count Grzljnzki is Sacha, Sashenka, Sanya, or Shura, depending who is telling me about him. I need a secretary just to keep up with who I'm actually talking to."

"Don't worry about the names," he suggested. "Just ask them about their wolfhounds and the latest revolt of the serfs, and you won't be able to shut them up."

"Lord knows that's the truth! I've heard that old saw that 'the peasants are always revolting' so many times I may scream if I hear it once more. I'm just not sure I can go through with all this silly charade, Ruegen. I'm not likely to find the man I want to marry at this stupid ball, especially now it's turned into a masquerade."

"Whose idiotic idea was that, anyway?"



“Caledonia’s. She thinks it will be fun. It’s apparently the latest fashion in all those cities on the southern peninsula.”

“I’ll wager your father isn’t too happy with this masquerade idea.”

“I think I could persuade Father to skip the whole thing if Maman hadn’t invited a lot of these people over the years. She loved parties, you know.”

“Yes. And showing you off. Of course, half these people wouldn’t have come if you hadn’t scandalized the whole continent by running off the way you did. So it’s partly your own fault.” He made a face at me. “And now you’ve gone and got Papa in the notion of marrying that mountain of a governess of yours. She gives credence to the old tales of giant blood on the north moors.”

“You behave yourself, or I’ll set the Bertas out for you, Ruegen!”

“What on earth are the Bertas? Anything like harpies?”

“Listen. This song is about them,” I said, and sang Rafe’s song of “The Three Foolish Princesses.” Ruegen laughed so hard that he fell out of the tree and landed on his face, right at someone’s feet. I was above, looking down, so I saw him look up into her face as he scrambled to his knees.

I’d never witnessed the phenomenon before, but I knew what was happening as I heard Ruegen stammer, “I’m thorr—*sorry!* I almoth—*almost* landed right on you. Did I hurt you?”

I didn’t have to hear her reply or see her face to know who the girl was; I recognized her clothes and her distinctive hairstyle. My cousin Ruegen had just fallen right out of the tree and head over heels into love at first sight with my friend Nualla, the Grenzlerin dwarf maiden.

## CHAPTER 15

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Ruegen in love would have been funny in any case. His face was as open as poppies to the sun; every emotion showed, especially embarrassment. He could flush almost as red as his hair in seconds. Ruegen in love with Nualla was downright hilarious because she was so alarmed and disbelieving over the whole notion. Even after being among humans for several months, Nualla had not absorbed the conventionalities and rituals of human courtship. Dwarfs are much more direct and practical about their relationships than we humans are. Ruegen, on the other hand, really did act much like the young men in all those poems and songs about courtly love that I had found so ridiculous. Not in my wildest imagination would I have conceived of such a spectacle. I have trouble yet deciding which was funnier, his actions or her reactions. I just know I had never laughed so often or so hard as I did watching the two of them.

Ruegen made a genuine effort; I have to give him that. Nualla's initial response would have discouraged most suitors. As I scrambled down from the tree myself, I heard her say, "I am not hurt. You do not need to kneel for my forgiveness. I am seeking for the princess, who is called here Snow White. Have you seen her?"

I dropped down from the tree. "I'm here, Nualla. Get up, Ruegen; you look foolish there on your knees."

"You know this vision of loveliness, cousin?" he asked as he got to his feet and bowed slightly to me, then deeply to Nualla. "Will you not do me the great honor of presenting me?"

I had a hard time not shouting with laughter, but I managed to keep it to a giggle. "I think you presented yourself, cousin. Hello, Nualla," I said, giving her a sisterly embrace. "This is my kinsman Ruegen von Kurtzheim. Ruegen, this is, of course, Nualla der Grenzler."

"I am enchanted, fair maid!" Ruegen exclaimed, bowing yet again.

Nualla looked from him to me. "Your kinsman acts very strangely, Kate," she said. "Is he truly under enchantment? That would possibly explain his odd behavior."

"I am indeed enthralled, sweet lady," Ruegen replied while I was laughing, "by thy dulcet tones and divine beauty."

Nualla backed a step or two away from him, an alarmed look on her face, "Is there a new witch at court, Kate? I know Lady Wilfride returned to Dansine, but your kinsman seems to have drunk some strange love potion."

"'Tis no bewitched elixir but thee, fair maid, who hath in thy sweet hands my aching heart," he murmured. She backed away a few more steps.

I was very nearly convulsed with laughter by this time. "Come on, Nualla," I gasped. "Ruegen, try to recover yourself. We'll see you later."

As we walked away—Nualla rather quickly—he called after us, "A thousand hours will I endure for every second we are parted!"

At the gate to the gardens proper, Nualla glanced back at him, her face full of real concern. "Kate, are you sure it is safe to leave your kinsman unattended? I fear he may fall in the lake or down a well in his distracted state. I should hate any harm to come to him, for you have spoken of him as with the affection of sister to brother."

I couldn't answer her; my breath was coming in gasps, and my face was wet with tears from laughing. Nualla put her arm around me gently. "Do not weep, Kate. I am sure he will be well if we can but

break the evil enchantment. We will go at once to a mountebank to inquire of an antidote." She couldn't seem to understand why this only made me positively howl, so she hurried me to my room to comfort me in my grief.

Nualla would not believe my explanation of what was wrong with Ruegen. "You say he wants to win my affection?" she questioned. "Is this then truly how humans do their mating? It is very foolish."

"You have no *idea* how foolish," I agreed, still laughing. "God, Nualla, if you could have seen your face—" and I collapsed into giggles again.

"Kate, I am a dwarf. How may I attract a human male? Such a union is so rare indeed as to be almost legendary. And given your kinsman's demeanor, I can well understand the reason for that rarity."

I wiped my leaking eyes yet again. "So can I, Nualla. So can I."

After the comedy of Ruegen and Nualla, the arrival of the Bertas, mother and daughters, was almost a letdown in terms of turning the whole birthday ball into an exercise in lunacy, but they did try. News that the ball was now a masquerade thrilled them. Not having brought costumes for fancy dress, they naturally had to spend a good deal of time inventing or concocting their outfits. They only had a week to assemble their elaborate costumes, a scant time considering their usual months of planning for a ball. Lady Liselle, a very noble widow who had been at court with my mother, had offered the Bertas rooms in her townhouse, so I barely had to see them, as I reported to Father a few days after their arrival, because they were so busy meeting with dressmakers, shoemakers, milliners, fletchers, and armorers.

"Fletchers? *Armorers*?" he repeated in astonishment. "What in the world—?"

"I didn't ask, since they want the costumes to be a surprise."

Father shook his head, looking rather like a man who could not believe the house he was currently in really was his familiar home of many years. As I said earlier, Father is a rather quiet, reserved man



who does not like ceremony and frivolity. He had acceded while Maman was alive to a yearly ball during Christmas and a few formal dinners with some dancing during the other annual festivals of the church. He had done so because Maman loved parties, and he had loved her. Because she loved him equally in return, she had made even those occasions rather restrained affairs. He had accepted the idea that there must be a grand ball for my significant sixteenth birthday because Maman had started planning it when I was about half that age. However, he looked now like a man who knows the situation has gotten out of hand but is unable to see a way of reining it in again.

"It's all right, Father," I said sympathetically. "They'll all go home soon. I hope."

He gave me a smile full of real affection. "So do I, my dear. So do I."

I had trouble working up much enthusiasm for the masquerade myself. I am that much like my father. At the Christmas masquerade in Wittenbach, I had worn a simple white robe and hooded cloak as an ancient pagan priestess. I would have liked to wear the same thing for this ball, but as the honoree of the whole spectacle, I felt obliged to invent something a bit more colorful and daring.

Discussing ideas with Nualla was useless, of course. She adamantly refused to even consider any costume more elaborate than her traditional dwarf court robe and a simple mask. "Dwarfs do not wear costumes," she insisted. "No one can fail to recognize me in a crowd of humans in any case. My kinswomen will not attend, though I know well they were invited. Everyone will know me at once, so why should I try to disguise myself?"

Lady Kunigunde made several suggestions, none of them to my liking, from a Greek goddess to a Byzantine saint. Her tastes ran to the religious or legendary. Appropriately, she was going as Brunhilde, warrior queen of ancient northern legends. I asked Ruegen if Baron Otto was going as one of her Viking followers or as Thor, god of thunder.



"So far as I know, neither," Ruegen said repressively. "The situation is not amusing, Kate. He needs a cane to walk most days." He was out of sorts from being avoided by Nualla and shouted at by both his father and my governess. "It's a stupid idea to have a masquerade anyway."

"Well, don't tell me! It was Caledonia who turned this from a party to a farce." I thought for a moment. "He could carry a spear to use as a cane."

"Stop it, Kate," he grumbled. "I don't know what's got into you lately."

"Me?" I protested. "I'm not the one thinking of going as the Harlequin."

"Well, I can't think of anything better. What are you going as?"

"I haven't decided. Let's sit down. Your legs are too long for me to keep up with you when you're striding about in anger, Ruegen." We were in the gardens that day, the orchard having lost all its leaves in a windy night earlier in the week. We sat on a bench in front of a bank of evergreens that lined the path to be boxwood maze.

"I thought the Harlequin might be amusing. You know I'm smitten, Kate. What would you have me do?"

"Stop acting the fool, Ruegen. Be serious for once in your life."

He nodded rather miserably. "I just can't seem to help myself. Be my friend and advise me, do. Will we still be friends, Kate, after we're married and all? I should hate us not to be."

"That's the silliest question you have asked in a lifetime, Ruegen. How could we not be friends?"

"It happens sometimes, you know."

"Well, it won't happen to us. Oh no—I hear the Bertas. I don't think I could stand to face them, Ruegen."

"Into the maze then; they'll never find us in there. Can you even find your way any longer?"

"I haven't tried it, but as long as I'm with you, it won't matter. You can protect me from the monster lurking in the labyrinth." Laughing, we both ran into the maze as we had often done as children.

## CHAPTER 16

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The deciding factor in choosing my costume for the birthday masquerade ball turned out to be overhearing one of the maids complaining to another that she was going to have to help Lady Rothgar dye her hair before the ball.

“That walnut dye turns my hands dark for days,” she complained.

I interrupted her complaints. “Greta, what sort of dye is that?”

“It’s made from walnut hulls, Highness,” she said. “It covers the gray in Lady Rothgar’s hair. Her lady’s maid makes us help so she won’t stain her own hands.”

“It does come off eventually, though?”

“Oh yes, Highness. In a few days from the skin, a bit longer from the hair. I don’t really mind doing it, Highness. Please don’t tell Her Ladyship I—” the girl said, looking nervous.

“I won’t, Greta, don’t worry. Do you think you could get me some of that dye?”

“Of course, Highness. But your hair is already dark.” She sounded puzzled.

“Oh, it’s not going on my hair,” I smiled. “It’s for my face and hands.”

The poor maid looked shocked that I would think of darkening my “white as snow” skin, but she agreed to bring me a bottle of the dye, which I tried first on my leg, where it wouldn’t show at all, before committing to the costume of a gypsy dancing girl.

On the morning before the ball, I washed my hair and had Nualla braid it while still wet into the many tight braids all dwarfs wear. In the afternoon, I rubbed the dye on every inch of my skin that would be exposed by the costume I had put together—a full skirt of crimson, a peasant blouse with bands of embroidery, and dancing slippers. I added as much jewelry as I could find in the treasury that fit the theme—a few chains of silver and gold, earrings, and some gold bracelets and rings. Then I combed my hair out of its braids and let it fall in at least temporary ripples to my waist. I added a simple mask to complete the costume and twirled for Nualla and the maid Greta who had helped me dress.

“You look very much like a gypsy,” Nualla agreed, “but I think I would know it is you.”

“The masquerade is a game, Nualla. No one is really fooled by the costume. We all just pretend to be talking to strangers and flirting and teasing a bit by pretending to guess who the other person is.”

“It is a foolish game, Kate.”

“I never said it wasn’t, Nualla. You look very elegant in your robe as well. Are you ready? I want to go down and watch everyone arrive from the musician’s gallery before we make our entrance. Ludger said we could.”

She nodded, so we went the long way around in order to avoid the more populated areas of the castle. We squeezed into the gallery to sit behind the decorative carved railing so we could see without being seen. I had spent hours there as a child, usually with Ruegen, watching guests arrive for the balls and dancing parties held while my mother was alive. None had been nearly so much fun to watch as this one, however. The costumes ranged from the merely ordinary to the truly bizarre. Most of the men looked self-conscious as they descended the steps into the hall from the opposite end to where we were concealed. Lady Kunigunde made a really convincing Brunhilde, but Ruegen had been right about his father. He wore an ordinary doublet and hose and a simple mask. I recognized a number of the

foreign visitors who had chosen to wear traditional garb from their own lands, and a few of the local nobility who had done more or less the same. Many apparently had visited the portraits of their ancestors; history was alive and walking around in the great hall.

The Bertas arrived in stupendous array. People stopped talking to stare as they made their way through the other revelers. I had no idea which was which, but they were all amazing. One was a mailed and helmeted Valkyrie, another an Amazon warrior with a full quiver of arrows and a bow slung over her shoulder, and the third apparently a shepherdess with a huge crook to tend her flock. The simple peasant frock of a shepherdess, however, had been converted to an absolute confection of laces, bows, and frills; the kilted skirt and petticoats beneath were about as likely to suit a real shepherdess as a full suit of armor.

I hadn't seen Ruegen come in, so I was not surprised when I heard him behind us in the door of the gallery. "I thought you'd be here, Kate," he said before he realized that Nualla was with me. I turned in time to see him sweep off his Harlequin hat and bow to her. "Sweet Lady Nualla, may I have the honor to escort you to the ball? King Wilhelm and Queen Caledonia await Her Highness for their own descent into the festive hall."

"Ruegen, would you *please* try to stop sounding like you stepped out of a bad ballad?" I said as we joined him to proceed to the room where Father waited with Caledonia to take me to the ball. Father's concession to the masquerade was a doublet of ancient cut that I recognized from a portrait of my grandfather. Caledonia had chosen the traditional garb of the women in a part of her native land; the tartan did not suit her, for the red in the plaid clashed with her hair, but I didn't comment. A gentleman in traditional Slavic dress, complete with the fur hat and boots, waited to escort her. By his height alone, this had to be Count Grzljnzk, who was first cousin to Caledonia.

Because it was a masquerade, there was no announcement of our names as we entered, but no one could have any doubt that the



tall woman with red hair was Caledonia, or that the tiny woman in a dwarf court robe was Nualla. Those watching knew that I was the Gypsy on Father's arm, but people were willing to play the game of pretending not to know, even after Father and I opened the ball with the dance we had practiced together a number of times.

I have to say it was a marvelous party. Caledonia had taken my mother's plan and embellished it a great deal, but all in all, it was probably just the sort of grand fête Maman would have wished me to have. Only one thing would have made it better, but I didn't dare hope for that.

Naturally, I had to dance with everyone. All the visiting eligible bachelors led me to the floor for one dance after another. I lost track of where Ruegen and Nualla had got to; at least an hour after our entrance, I finally saw the Harlequin approaching me and grabbed his hand before he could speak. "Let's get out of here for a few minutes. My feet are killing me," I said, pulling him out the door onto the terrace before he could even speak.

There were too many people on the terrace, so I kept right on going down the steps and along the path to find a bench that would be at least partly secluded so I could avoid any of the eager visitors I had not yet partnered at the ball.

Finally, we reached a bench set in a small cul-de-sac between a fountain and a set of steps leading down to the next level of the gardens. I plopped down on the bench and sighed with relief as I eased off my shoes. The Harlequin was strangely silent.

I peered at him. "Are you all right?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

He shrugged but did not answer.

"Don't be cross; it's my birthday."

"It is, isn't it?" said a voice I almost didn't recognize. "I'll give you a present, then!" He grabbed me by the shoulders and kissed me on the mouth, hard, before I could do more than gasp. When he released me, his voice was hoarse with anger. "There then, Highness, wasn't that what you went lookin' for in the gardens?"



“Rafe!” I exclaimed. “Oh, Rafe, I didn’t know it was you!”

“Aye, I’m well aware o’ *that*!” He jumped up and strode away. Before I could get my wits together and my shoes back on to run after him, he had disappeared.

I could find neither Rafe nor Ruegen after I returned to the great hall. Various encounters with hopeful partners slowed my progress, but I finally found Nualla and pulled her into a corner. “Have you seen the Harlequin, Nualla?”

“Do you mean your kinsman Ruegen? He was dancing earlier with the Berta who is an Amazon. I think he may be avoiding the others if he can.”

“I’m sure he is, but I don’t mean Ruegen. Rafe is here, and he’s the *other* Harlequin.”

“Which other do you mean? There are at least three others here that I have seen. The Harlequin seems to be a popular character for the masquerade.”

“I didn’t know that; I thought Rafe was Ruegen and dragged him out into the garden so I could sit and rest my feet. For some reason, Rafe is angry with me, Nualla. I have to find him.”

“Why would he be angry, Kate?”

“I have no idea, but he is. He-he kissed me, out in the garden, and it was like being hit hard in the teeth with a fist.”

“That is very odd. What did you say to him?”

“Nothing! Only that my feet hurt and—and he asked me if I wasn’t looking to be kissed in the gardens, or something like that. I have to find him, Nualla. You have to help me.”

The rest of the masquerade was not a stunning success to me. I had to keep dancing, of course. That was why all the visitors had come, and I could not shame my father by ignoring them. So I danced and tried to keep an eye out for the Harlequin costumes. Nualla also looked for the Harlequin. She found Ruegen most often, because he kept pressing her to dance with him. Finally, she partnered him in a

set dance with three other couples. I saw them dancing but had no chance to leave my own set to ask her if she had seen Rafe. I myself danced with both Ruegen and another Harlequin, who also was not Rafe but some Slav or other.

Finally at midnight, everyone took off their masks to reveal themselves to one another. I looked in vain for Rafe's dear and familiar face, but he was not in the great hall unless he was hiding. The dancing went on long after midnight, for the wine was flowing and spirits were high. I wanted to steal away, but it was my party, and *noblesse oblige* demanded that I remain until I could stay on my feet no longer. Even when I finally left the ball and got into bed, however, my mind kept turning over questions. Where had Rafe gone? Why was he angry with me? Would he come back? When I finally did manage to fall asleep, there was light in the sky.

## CHAPTER 17

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Rafe made his reappearance two nights after the ball at the farewell banquet for many of the departing guests. Some were staying a bit longer, so there would be a second and even a third banquet, but this was the large one, so naturally entertainment was called for after the meal. When my father signaled to the musician's gallery, it was "Tomas" who descended the stairs. He did not look at me as he took his place and bowed to my father and the rest of the guests. All three songs he sang that night had to do with love lost or betrayed. After the final song, he did not linger in the hall for even a cup of wine.

Over the next few days, I saw Rafe in the hall when he sang but otherwise almost not at all. When I did see him at a distance, he pointedly turned away and went in another direction so as not to meet me face-to-face. From being puzzled and hurt, I became puzzled and angry, and for another few days, I made a point of being the first to turn and go out of my way to avoid meeting him.

Nualla told me I was being foolish. "If you wish to talk to him, send for him to come. No one will think that odd; he was your music teacher in Wittenbach." Her suggestion was reasonable and practical, but I had long since left reason behind where Rafe was concerned.

"He doesn't want to talk to me," I said petulantly. "He has made that perfectly clear. And I don't want to talk to anyone who doesn't care to talk to me. He's the one being stubborn!"

How long this might have gone on I can't say. Nualla, pragmatic and rational, took matters into her own hands.

One misty morning not long after, I agreed to meet her after Mass in the solar where we would work on our mending or other sewing. She wasn't there when I arrived in the room, but she often visited the other dwarfs while I was at church, so I thought nothing of her absence. I settled into my favorite sewing chair and got out the tunic I was making for one of the pages for Christmas. I was even humming a little tune when I heard a step behind me. Expecting Nualla, I said "hello," but didn't turn around. I was startled to hear Rafe say, "You sent for me, Highness?"

My head snapped around to see him standing just inside the doorway, his lute slung over his back. His expression was neutral, his eyes cold and not meeting mine.

"I did not send for you," I corrected. "You must have been misinformed."

"I apologize for disturbin' you then, Highness." His bow was barely an inclination from the waist. "I bid you farewell."

"You're leaving?" I was stricken.

"I thought I would, if the king will excuse me my promise to stay a few weeks longer. Several other lords invited me to visit their manors and courts if I had a mind to. I thought it best to go before winter sets in."

"I see," I said stiffly. "Well, then, you should go talk to the king."

"Good mornin', then." He turned to go. I wanted to call him back but refused to let myself do so. He left the room quickly and disappeared down the corridor. When I could no longer hear his footsteps, I fled to my room, where Nualla found me weeping disconsolately half an hour later.

"What is it, Kate? What did Rafe say to you?" she demanded.

"He's leaving! He's talking to Father right now, and he's going away. He doesn't want to stay!" I sobbed against her shoulder. "I've been such a fool to think he ever cared for me!"

"You are both out of your minds!" she exclaimed. "He read the message and ran out of the gallery like a man running to a fire. I watched him go. What is wrong between you?"

"I don't know!" I sobbed. "He doesn't talk to me at all. He won't even look at me!"

Muttering under her breath, she left me weeping and was gone for several minutes. When she came back, she made me wash my face and fix my hair. "You are going to talk to Rafe," she ordered me. "I will not allow you to be miserable and not at least know why. Now go to the solar and talk. Do not let him leave until he tells you what is wrong. I promised him you would come, so you must go to keep my honor."

I did not go happily, but I did go. Rafe stood looking out the window. He did not turn as I entered the room, and Nualla closed the door behind me. I saw him tense before he finally said, "All right, I'm here. Nualla made me promise to come or dishonor my friendship to her kin. What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to tell me what I've done that you won't even look at me any more," I demanded.

"Can you not guess?" he asked, still not turning to look at me.

"If I could guess, I wouldn't have to ask! You've been back here for two weeks, and the only words I've had from you directly have been an insult and a farewell. I want to know why I deserve your—your hatred."

He turned slowly and looked at me then, his face an unreadable mask. "I'd never presume to speak to a lady promised to another," he said after a long moment, "even if she keeps her promise a secret from her own father."

"Promised to—" I stared at him. "I don't have the slightest idea what you are talking about, Rafe MacHanlan!"

"Who did you think I was when you pulled me out to the garden the night o' the ball?" he asked harshly.

"I thought you were Ruegen! He was in a Harlequin costume as well."



“Aye, Ruegen! I wondered you didn’t pull me into the maze with you that night, as you like to let him protect you from the monster there!”

“What on earth are you talking about, Rafe? Ruegen and I were children here together, and we played in the maze, yes. It was one of our favorite places to hide from our mothers, and after we read the story of the labyrinth, of course we pretended to fight the monster. But that’s been years!”

“And will you still go there when you’re married to him, Kate?”

“Marry Ruegen? I’m not marrying Ruegen! How in perdition did you get such a stupid idea?”

“I heard you! I was behind the evergreens; I meant to surprise you. He wanted to know if you’d still be friends even after you got married. And then you ran laughin’ into the maze to escape the Bertas.”

Enlightenment dawned on me. I had heard of the green-eyed monster of jealousy, but I had never actually seen it before. Rafe’s own green eyes burned like emeralds set on fire. With a small sigh of exasperation, I moved quickly to throw my arms around his neck. “You dear, jealous idiot! You thought I was *in love* with Ruegen?”

“You—you mean you’re not?” He sounded as if he didn’t quite believe me.

“I am not in love with Ruegen.” I pushed him back to sit on the window seat, then sat beside him. “In the first place, he’s like my brother. In the second, he’s in love with someone else. That question about marriage—I don’t even recall what we were talking about beforehand. All the visitors, I think, and that I wasn’t likely to find the man I’d marry among them.” I smiled up at him gently. “I knew you were on my mother’s original guest list. Father showed it to me, and I saw your name on it. But given what I knew of the circumstances, I didn’t think you’d come as the Prince of Adaintire, Rafe.”

He had the grace to hang his head and blush. “I’ve been a bloody great fool then, haven’t I?”

I laughed softly. "Yes, but no more than I have. If it weren't for Nualla, I'd have let you go off wandering and never asked why you were angry."

"It's good she's a sensible dwarf," he smiled sheepishly. "She had to shame me into comin' to face you."

"Me as well," I admitted. "We are a likely pair, Rafe. You haven't talked to Father about leaving, have you?"

"No, he was busy with the Privy Council."

"Well, thank God for that, at least. So you will stay?"

He nodded, taking my hands in his. "I'll stay, though I don't expect our old music lesson arrangement will get us much time alone with that Lady Kunigunde sittin' in as Ludger says she always does when he's teachin' you."

"No, I don't suppose so either. But I know lots of hiding places around the castle, Rafe, that served me and Ruegen very well when we were children hiding from our mothers. And you could still give me music lessons. I might like to learn the harp as well as the lute."

He smiled. "Then we could be a pair o' wanderin' minstrels, even if I never do manage to claim my throne." His tone and his face turned serious on the last part of that statement.

"Is the situation still hopeless, Rafe?"

"I didn't manage to find out much this summer," he admitted. "I lurked around the taverns a good bit, but no one was talkin' much about the regent or the king. My father's not been a bad leader, Kate, even if he's not the rightful one. People on the islands aren't so interested in who wears the crown as they are worried about the raiders."

"Raiders?"

"Aye, boardin' the ships and takin' what they please, landin' in the coves and lootin' the manor houses and churches as well. Not just on Adainttire; it's all the Island Kingdoms suffering from the thievin' bastards."

"That's bad, then. What are they doing against them?"

"There's not a lot they can do, Kate. The raiders have the faster ships and can be on Coir Inis one night and all the way up to Thiarcladach the next day noon, and that trip takes any o' the islanders' ships a good three hours more. They call them the *Diabhal Cuiren*, devil ships."

"How long has this been happening, Rafe?"

"Ah, it's always happened some, the raidin', but this past three years it's been gettin' worse by the week."

"But why doesn't your father do *something*?"

He shrugged, then sighed. "Not much anyone really can do on his own, that's the trouble. It needs a united front to beat the devils, and that's one thing the Island Kingdoms don't have and likely never will. They're all intermarried and kin, all feudin' like a houseful o' misbehavin' children most o' the time." He made a rueful face. "I don't see much hope o' settlin' the problems with my father with the raiders ragin' up and down among the islands at will. The last thing I'd ever do is try to start another conflict to tear at the loyalties o' the vassals. They need to be workin' together, not fightin' among themselves more than they already do."

I squeezed his hands and smiled at him. "Spoken like a king for sure, Rafe. More concerned for the good of the realm than his own rights."

He nodded in agreement. "I learned that much from my grandda, I guess. But for all the good it does, I might as well have gone back to the forest."

"And been caught by Ulf again? I think not, Rafe."

"I suppose not. Kate, what are we goin' to do about ourselves?"

"Is there something we need to do, Rafe?"

"You know *verra* well what I mean, Kate. I know your father won't wait forever to promise you to someone. And I saw them all, Kate. There's not one but a dozen who'd like to wed you."

"I'm not wedding anyone I don't choose for myself, Rafe MacHanlan. I've learned that much from Nualla and the other dwarf

women. Arranging a marriage is a stupid human activity designed to give neither bride nor groom the least bit of dignity.”

“Have you told your father that, then?”

“Not in so many words. But I won’t be forced into a marriage not of my choosing. I ran away from marrying Hubert because I didn’t choose him. I took my punishment for that without arguing because I disappointed my father by not thinking before I acted. I humiliated him and the entire realm with my foolishness. But even Father didn’t fault my running from an unpalatable marriage, just the lack of sense and propriety I showed. He’d never force me to marry a man I really objected to.”

“Well then. I suppose we’ll just have to wait and see what happens, Kate. It’s certain I want to wed you, but it may not be soon.”

“You told me once there are some things worth taking a risk for. There are also things worth waiting for.”

“So do you think I’m worth both the risk and the wait?”

“Oh yes. I certainly do.” I smiled up into his eyes. “I’d even risk my father’s disapproval again to wait for you, Rafe MacHanlan of Adaintire, but don’t think I won’t be figuring out how to shorten the wait!”

## CHAPTER 18

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A relationship that must be kept secret is never entirely comfortable, but overall, Rafe and I made the best of things over the next few days. The court was not nearly so crowded, fortunately, for almost everyone had gone home except the members of the Privy Council and the regular officers Father kept in residence at the castle when he was there. These officers changed from time to time, all of them being vassals with their own lands to attend to; Father tried to make their duties to the court not so heavy that they could not also administer their own estates. The absence of so many people made seeing Rafe paradoxically more difficult; with not so many distractions, Lady Kunigunde was very much back to her usual form of guarding me most of the time. Fortunately, Father soon discussed a few changes in my course of study with her.

I was present for Father's discussion with my governess. "I should like very much for Her Highness to pursue her music, Lady Kunigunde. Her mother was a good musician, as you may recall, and both Ludger and Tomas say the princess has talent. If you concur, Tomas has agreed to teach her again as he did last winter at her uncle's court. Ludger says Tomas is an excellent teacher, and Her Highness learned a great deal from him."

"I would like to try the harp, Father. Tomas plays it so beautifully, and I remember Maman playing."



Father nodded. "Indeed. Her instrument is stored in the musicians' room. I will have Ludger find it for Tomas to tune, and you may see what you can learn."

"Thank you, Father. I'll try my best."

"Your Majesty, if Tomas is to teach Her Highness the harp—and I do most heartily concur—would it not also be beneficial to let him teach her more of the language of his native islands?" boomed Lady Kunigunde. For probably the first time since I had met her, I wanted to kiss her horsey face. "Her Highness is very quick to learn languages! She has learned all I really know of the island tongue, which is very little! I The young man is very well spoken for a commoner, no doubt owing to the time he has spent in genteel society at court! I"

"That is an excellent suggestion, if Her Highness wishes to study the language of the islands and if Tomas is willing to teach it to her. Daughter?"

"Oh yes, Father. What little I've learned is quite pretty. I can well understand why there are so many musicians in the Island Kingdoms."

Father nodded. "Good then. Is there anything else you wish to study, since we are discussing changes?"

"I'd like to learn to use a sword, Father. You know I always wanted to practice with the boys."

He nodded, looking pained. "I do know, and I also recall your mother's reaction the first time you got a cut from a knife when you and Ruegen decided to reenact a battle."

"Father, I was five! And Ruegen didn't mean to cut me; it was an accident. Anyway, I thought that if you don't mind, I might train with Nualla and the other dwarf women. I am not that much taller than the dwarfs."

He considered that for a moment, then nodded. "All right, that should be safe enough. Torgas is a responsible dwarf who will not let anyone come to harm if he can prevent it. Is there anything more?"

"Mayda the dwarf is a very skilled healer, Father. If she will, I should like to have her teach me about the medicines she makes."

“That is always good to know, though I should have thought you had had enough of potions.” His eyes positively twinkled.

I wrinkled my nose. “Lady Wilfride did not teach me anything about making potions, Father. She just made the whole west wing reek with them.”

He nodded. “Very well, that will be your new course of study for a few months, Katherine. Lady Kunigunde, I depend on you to see that propriety is maintained,” Father said seriously.

Being able to be with Rafe, even in Lady Kunigunde’s presence, was so much better than I had hoped for while he had been avoiding me that I reveled in every moment. Lady Kunigunde occupied herself during the music lessons by either reading or sewing, but she listened avidly to the language lessons. “I wish to expand my own horizons, young man!!” she boomed at Rafe. With a slight bow to her and a rueful glance at me, he good-naturedly agreed to teach us both at the same time.

I did miss the intimacy of our lessons in Wittenbach, and especially the humorous verses he had made up about the absurd members of the court there. Our own court was less filled with eccentrics, perhaps, but Rafe could not resist the temptation to at least pen verses about some of the people around us. He made me promise to keep them to myself, so I hid them in the secret drawer of my desk after I had given him all the letters I’d written him over the summer and never been able to send.

“I’ll have to make up a verse about you as well,” he whispered. We were secreted for a moment in one of the hiding places I had mentioned to him, one Ruegen and I had used frequently as children. The cubby under the stair that led up to the musician’s gallery was fairly safe during the day when the hall was empty, but it seemed to have shrunk considerably since I was a child. We had to squeeze in together in order to close the door. I didn’t really mind, but I could see why being that close together too often was not a good idea; we were only human, after all. He continued teasing me. “Hidin’ love

letters in your desk. Did you write me any love poems, like your cousin Ruegen?"

I had to laugh, even though I felt slightly disloyal to Ruegen in doing so. "Is that all over the castle?"

"Oh aye. He's been seen all about castin' lovesick glances at the lovely dwarf maiden, and heavin' great sighs like a lovesick squire in a ballad."

"How did they find out about the poems? I can't believe Nualla would mention them to anyone but me."

"Nay, he dropped one o' them from his pocket in the trainin' hall is what I heard. The other lads have given him a hard time on account o' that."

"The poems are really very bad," I laughed. "I love him like a brother, but even a sisterly affection can't make them good."

"Poor Ruegen," Rafe smiled sympathetically.

"Shh. Someone's coming."

He kissed me gently and slipped out from under the stairs; he could appear to be coming from the kitchens toward the musician's gallery; the hall was a shortcut; we usually met in the cubby for that reason. While he distracted whoever was there, I slipped out and went through toward the kitchens.

I hated for Ruegen to suffer so from pangs of love, but he really was rather ridiculous. He had started slipping the poems under Nualla's door late at night. She had read me a few of them.

Love's sweet face sits on her brow,  
Like roses and gives hope that now  
Her heart will soften like a plum  
As mine is beating like a drum.

"What is that supposed to mean, Kate? It does not make sense."

"I don't think Ruegen's ever been in love before, Nualla. He's doing what the young men in the poems do, writing verses. He's just not very good at it."

"No, Rafe's verses are much funnier," she agreed.

"I don't think Ruegen meant his to be funny, Nualla." I smiled at her over my sewing. "He's really trying very hard to impress you." I took a few stitches in the skirt I was hemming in silence. "Do you really find his attentions totally unwelcome?"

She made several stitches in the vest she was decorating. "No, not unwelcome. It is very nice to be told one is beautiful, no matter who says it. I do not understand why he thinks so, but it is very nice."

"Do you find *him* unattractive?"

"No, not at all. He is no dwarf, but he is not so very tall, like your father or the queen, or that Slav, Count Grzljnzki. Your kinsman is only a little taller than some dwarfs I have met, and he has nice hair and very pretty eyes, all soft, misty blue." The sudden tenderness in her voice surprised me so much I glanced up at her; I had never realized until then that dwarfs *could* blush, but there was a definite pink cast to her cheeks.

"You like him!"

She didn't answer at once, but finally said, "If only he would not be so foolish, I think I would like him very much, Kate."

"We have to do something to help poor Ruegen," I told Rafe during another of our cubbyhole meetings. "He needs *something* to make his life bearable."

"You're just feelin' guilty because it's your fault," he teased.

"It is not my fault!"

"Well, you did introduce Lady Kunigunde to Baron Otto. Do you think they really might get married?"

"Ruegen seems to think so, and he's quite surly about it all. He says his ears ache from dawn to dusk now."

"I can believe that. What he needs is occupation; he has too much time on his hands to daydream about Nualla."

Ruegen had, of course, stayed at the castle with his father after most of the other guests had left. Still officially a squire, he did some guard duty, but he had a lot of idle time, too; since Lady Kunigunde



and Baron Otto spent a good bit of their time shouting words of affection at one another, Ruegen fled his own quarters as often as possible. As humorous as Baron Otto's deafness made his courtship with Lady Kunigunde, it was a serious impediment to his participation on the Privy Council, though having been an ambassador to various foreign realms, he was definitely needed. Father and most of the council lords had tried, without notable success, to communicate. I overheard the conversation with Father as I passed the closed door of Father's study.

"We need you on the Privy Council, Otto," Father yelled.

Baron Otto shouted back, "Need new privies? Get the dwarfs to build 'em, then, Your Majesty."

"No, no, the *council*. I'm going to need you on the council!"

"Going to cancel? Never heard of the dwarfs canceling out on an agreement. Must be a mistake."

I overheard Lord Rothgar, the chancellor, try as well. "Otto, we may have to raise taxes to pay the troops!" he bellowed.

"Axes for the troops? Don't like fighting with an axe! Give me a good sword any day!"

"Otto, we need more *money*!"

"I don't mean to be funny, Ruprecht. Just don't like axes!"

"It's impossible," Lord Rothgar complained to Father. "We might as well hold council meetings in the market square. By the time we make Otto understand what we're discussing, the whole castle knows as well." We were at supper in Lord and Lady Rothgar's rooms. Father had escorted Nualla and me; Caledonia had given some excuse and declined; she intensely disliked Lady Rothgar, who had been a good friend of Maman's.

"I know that, Ruprecht, but I still value his insight. I don't know what to do."

To everyone's surprise, Nualla spoke up. "Why do you not ask the baron's son to sit in the council and take notes to give to his father? Would that not serve well?"



Father looked at Nualla in appreciation. "What a brilliant idea! Ruegen is a bit young for actual council duties, but he has a good mind and is as loyal as anyone in the kingdom. What do you think, Ruprecht?"

"I believe that would serve, Sire, provided anyone can read his script."

Nualla fussed with her napkin to avoid the eyes of the men. "Lord Ruegen's script is quite legible," she said, blushing brightly.

Father gave me a questioning glance, to which I replied with a shrug. "Ruegen writes as well as I do, Father. We had the same tutor when we were learning."

"Excellent!" Father exclaimed. "I'll speak with him in the morning, then. He seems a bit downcast lately for some reason. This will give him something to do to forget his troubles. Let's have another glass of wine to toast his success."

## CHAPTER 19

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So Ruegen became his father's ears and voice in the council, and he did look happier than he had since he had tumbled out of the tree at Nualla's feet. Autumn wet turned early to winter snow and ice that year, confining us all to the castle much of the time. Rafe began attending the same Mass as Lady Kunigunde and I and walking us back from St. Jerome's just outside the castle walls. He always inquired politely of our plans for the day. We had developed a coded way of mentioning times and places we could meet privately based on the music I was learning; our exchanges sounded innocuous to Lady Kunigunde but served us well to arrange at least a few meetings not under her supervision.

Christmas had come and gone, and the snow was still deep, the lake largely frozen. True to his promise of the summer, Father was teaching me chess when I was not otherwise occupied. I have to admit that my other studies were coming better than the chess. Father always inquired about my progress in my various pursuits when we met; we also discussed other matters, from the work the dwarfs were doing on the east wing of the castle to the matters under discussion in the Privy Council.

"I can't put you on the council officially, Katherine," Father told me, "but you need to be aware of certain matters of state."

"Why do you not want me on the council, Father?" I inquired.

His face impassive, he answered, "I prefer not to cause contention when I can avoid it, Katherine. If I put you on the council, Caledonia would expect a seat as well. There are reasons I would prefer her not to have one." He gave me a very direct look. "The precedent of her not having one has been set, and I would prefer not to break that precedent."

"Because you did not give her a seat at once, Father?"

He nodded. "That, of course, and the fact that your mother, God rest her, did not want a council seat at all. She had no interest in politics."

"She was too busy sticking me with sewing pins," I smiled.

He returned my smile. "Perhaps. In any case, her absence from the council set the precedent of the queen not having a seat, and I prefer not to change it now." His tone did not invite questions about why he did not want Caledonia on the council, so I did not press the matter. With Father in residence and Lady Kunigunde as my governess, Caledonia left me alone, and I did the same for her.

Spending time with Father was very pleasant. It had not been so when I was a child. He had not really known much about how to treat a girl child; he was accustomed to directing troops and training boys—the pages and squires—in the skills they would need as knights and administrators of their estates. He had not known what to say to a daughter his wife treated like a little doll to be dressed up and pampered, so he had not really said much at all except to emphasize that my behavior should always be dignified and restrained. He had taught me to hold my head high and meet the eyes of anyone addressing or being addressed by me but not much else. Ironically, it was my very rashness of running away which, although he deplored the impropriety of the act, had convinced him that girls and boys were not that much different. He actually applauded me for refusing to allow Hubert to force me into a marriage, even if he chastised me for not thinking clearly before leaving the castle. That I had accepted the discipline he meted out without further rebellion had earned me his

respect. I had known the chess lessons were a reward, but they were also a ruse to blind Caledonia to the fact that he was discussing Privy Council matters with me on a frequent basis.

On a typically cold January afternoon not long after Christmas, we were in the study with the chessboard on a table before the fire, our chairs drawn up to either side. We had begun the game with the usual moves of pawns, and I sat studying the effect of Father's move of a rook. We both looked up when Selwyn, the footman, knocked before entering the door.

"Tomas the minstrel, Your Majesty. He says you sent for him?"

"Yes, I did, Selwyn. Come in, Tomas. Come join us by the fire."

Rafe bowed to both of us. "Majesty, Highness. If you wish me to wait, Majesty—?"

"No, no," Father said, waving him to a chair flanking the table with the chessboard. "As you see, I am teaching Katherine chess. She informs me she is a better harpist than a chess player. I believe you play chess, do you not?"

"A bit, Majesty. It's a way to pass an evenin' when there's no one wantin' to hear a song."

"Then you shall be the judge of whether she is right about her relative abilities." Father smiled at him, then at me. "One skill required to become a master at chess, Katherine, is the ability to focus on the board in the face of distractions. I need to know what Tomas can tell me of the Island Kingdoms and these northern raiders we've been hearing about, and you need to be able to concentrate despite our conversation."

"All right, Father." I gave Rafe a smile. "He keeps making every lesson harder, Tomas. There is always some new rule or other for chess, just as you are always teaching me another chord combination on the harp. I really think you are conspiring to tax my poor brain beyond its limits."

"Nonsense, Katherine. The brain is like any other part of the body. To make it function efficiently when you need it most, you must

exercise and strengthen it regularly,” Father said in a tone of mock severity. He moved a bishop to take one of my pawns, nodded, and then turned to Rafe in all seriousness. “You visited your home in the islands this past summer, did you not, Tomas?”

“Aye, that I did. I’ll gladly tell you all I know of the raiders, though it’s little enough.”

“Do, please. How do the islanders view the situation?”

“Not good, especially in the outlying towns. It’s the manor houses and churches, the little villages with poor defenses that suffer the most, o’ course. These raiders are fierce enough in a fight, but they want the easy pickin’s more than a pitched battle against strong defenses. They slash and burn and carry off loot and captives, and no one’s able to catch them or predict where they’ll be the next time they’re seen. People are that jumpy, and no question they’re scared.”

“What of the raiders’ ships?”

“Fast,” Rafe said. “Verra fast. There’s no one on the islands can catch the damned things, that’s sure.”

I moved one of my knights in the wrong direction and lost it to one of Father’s castles. With a grimace, I considered my next move while the interview continued.

“Has any effort been made by the Island Kingdoms to coordinate some kind of plan?” Father asked.

“Ah, Majesty, if you know any o’ the kings, you hardly have to ask. They’re all too stubborn to work together. None wants to bow to any other, so they guard their own as best they can, but it’s not much good.”

“How long has it been going on, Tomas? We here on the continent have only been hearing about it the past several months, but it’s been going on a while, hasn’t it?”

“Oh aye. I’ve been away a few years, but it was happenin’ some even when I was a boy. We’d hear o’ some manor house or village looted on one island or another every couple o’ months, but it’s got worse the past three years, they told me. Most folk think these



raiders must have a new leader that's managed somehow to pull them all under one banner and that he's directin' the raids to make them totally unpredictable."

I moved my own castle and took a pawn. It wasn't a brilliant move, for it left my other knight vulnerable. I was surprised that Father chose to take another pawn instead.

"It's too bad about the infighting among the island kings," he said. "Until they stand together, they will fall individually when the raveners decide to take them."

"Aye, but you know that independent streak we all have," Rafe smiled. He was watching the game board and nodded as I moved a bishop to take one of Father's knights.

"Yes. Which of the islands is your home, Tomas?"

"I was a boy on both Adaintire and Coir Inis," Rafe said easily. "We're all kin, you know, and there's many as move back and forth one year to the next."

"Indeed." Father moved his knight to threaten my queen. "Check, Katherine. Think your way out of that." He smiled at me and turned back to Rafe. "It's too bad old Drew MacHanlan is gone. He managed to keep the whole lot more or less tame for a good number of years. That would have been when you were a boy, of course."

"Aye," said Rafe without expression. Drew MacHanlan had been his grandfather, of course.

"We here on the south of the continent are not so directly threatened by these raiders, but we cannot sit idly by and let the islands be taken over if there is a way to prevent it. The northern kingdoms are our allies, and even several of the southern and eastern lands trade heavily with the islands. The northern lands that lie on the coast will look to their own sea defenses, of course, but it seems to me that the place to beat these raiders is really on shore, to strengthen the defenses of all the coastline. That will take ground troops, of course."

“Aye, that makes sense,” Rafe agreed. “No one on the Central Sea or northern coast has a ship that’ll match these Northmen in the water.”

I moved my bishop and took Father’s knight. He smiled at me. “Good, good. That was the right move for the moment, Katherine.” He moved his own bishop to take another pawn, and I studied the board again while he turned back to Rafe. “How likely is it that if we offered ground troops, the island kings would accept our aid?”

Rafe considered the suggestion, his face serious, then shook his head. “That’s a hard one, Majesty. Some would be willin’ to do anythin’ to beat these raiders, but some—well, just say they’d be suspicious o’ your motives.”

Father nodded. “No one wants a foreign power parked on his doorstep, much less in his very hall.” Father’s eyebrow quirked as I moved my queen to take one of his rooks. He studied the board, and I studied him.

It had suddenly dawned on me that Father was not merely picking Rafe’s brain for what he had learned over the summer. To ask questions about the situation was perfectly normal; to discuss an offer of troops, a proposed alliance, was not. Father would never be so incautious as to discuss such things with a commoner; this was the deepest sort of Privy Council business. I shot a glance at Rafe whose face had gone suddenly still; he was staring at the chessboard, and I saw him glance at Father with a slightly alarmed expression. Father moved his knight to threaten my queen again. “Check, Katherine.”

It was a trap, of course. If I saved the queen with my bishop, I would lose the king to a castle; if I saved the queen with my own knight, I would lose the king to a bishop. I met Father’s mildly amused eyes and moved the knight.

“Checkmate, Katherine,” he said with a little smile. “You should have seen that coming.”

“He knows,” Rafe said as we snuggled into the cubbyhole under the stair. “How in perdition does he know who I am, Kate?”

“I don’t know how, but he most certainly does,” I sighed.

“What do you think he plans to do?”

“Oh, I think he’s already done it, Rafe. That was a warning to both of us.”

He was silent for a moment. “Aye, I suppose you’re right. A warnin’ to do what?”

“Behave ourselves, I should say. He’s gone out of his way to give us time together, Rafe. He was the one who brought up the music lessons, not me. I’m taking that as tacit approval. But I think we need to be very, very discreet. For whatever reason, he doesn’t want anyone *else* to know who you are.”

“Aye. I wonder why.”

“I suspect he’ll tell us in his own good time, Rafe. Father’s always been a keen strategist.”

He laughed softly. “Aye, he’s canny, all right. Do you think he knows we meet here as well?”

“I’d place a wager on it. A large one.”

“Damnation. Am I never going to feel free to really kiss you, Kate? Now I feel like I have a knife at my back as well as a sword at my throat.”

“Well, he didn’t lock me in a tower or throw you in a dungeon, so I expect we can take that as some sort of sign.” I slid my arms around his neck. “I’m willing to risk the tower if you’re willing to risk the dungeon.”

“I think the dungeon is worse than the tower, but I’ll risk it this once, at least. If I’m hangin’ in chains tonight, at least I’ll have one good kiss to remember.”

“Stop talking, then, and start kissing,” I suggested and raised my lips to meet his.

He was right; the kiss was worth the risk. Even in the dead of winter, the memory alone would have warmed not just a dungeon

cell, but the whole prison. I don't know how long it lasted, but it could have gone on for hours more for my part. Rafe was somewhat more cautious. He left me to recover my breath as he slipped out of the cubbyhole and disappeared up the stair.

## CHAPTER 20

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The winter seemed to last forever, but I had little to complain about. As long as the ground was frozen and the snow piled deep, life in the castle went on much the same. Rafe and I had our harp and language lessons and the minutes we stole alone in the cubbyhole under the stair. In one of our stolen moments alone, Rafe told me that Father had questioned him even further concerning the islands and which of the kings he thought would be receptive to offers of ground troops to strengthen their coastal defenses.

“He won’t say a word about knowin’ who I am, Kate,” he complained. “It’s *verra* unnervin’ knowin’ he knows and not knowin’ why he won’t say so.”

“He’s bound to have his reasons, Rafe.”

“Aye, I expect so, but it’s still unnervin’.”

“He’ll tell you when the time is right.”

Father had sent envoys to the island kings whom Rafe had identified as the most likely to welcome an offer of ground troops to help fight off the Northmen, and three of the four had replied that they would be glad of some help. Accordingly, the main force of our troops began to muster on the edge of the northern moors as soon as the roads started to clear. As soon as Father and the smaller force from our



southern region joined them, they would march to the north coast and ferry over to the islands from Undine.

Before the troops would leave, however, the annual knighting was to take place for those young men who had reached their eighteenth birthday since the previous April. Ruegen was among these, and he was understandably excited by the prospect of full recognition as a man among men. Happily, his romantic pursuit of Nualla had taken an upturn; he'd given up writing bad verses and instead was employing what free time he had visiting the dwarfs' work on the castle's east wing.

Nualla was rather surprised the day we met him there; I was not. "Hello, Ruegen," I said as we came from our training session with the other dwarf women. "What are you doing here?"

"Just watching. I still want to restore the ruins at Kurtzheim, you know."

"Restore what ruins?" Nualla asked.

"At my home, the oldest part of the castle is in ruins—there was a fire, and the newer part of the castle was left more intact, so they never repaired the older part. I've always wanted to rebuild it," Ruegen explained. "I thought it would be a good opportunity to watch your kinsmen work, to see what I might have done one day."

"Ruegen's very enthusiastic," I told my friend. "Tell her all about your plans, Ruegen. I must go; Father is expecting me."

When I saw Nualla later, she had a small wooden box in her hands and a smile on her face. "Did you know Ruegen is so talented?" she asked me, holding out the little carved box. "Is it not beautiful?"

"It is," I agreed. "How did you ever get him to show you his carvings? He's very shy about them."

"We were looking at the plans he has drawn for Kurtzheim. They are very well drawn! And then he moved them, and this was underneath. I had no idea he was so skilled. He should be proud, not shy."

"Men are strange creatures, Nualla."

"Yes, they are. What is this knighting ceremony? Is it very painful?"

“No, not at all. Well, perhaps for those who believe bathing is punishment it is. The candidates take a ritual bath to purify their bodies, then stand vigil over their arms, praying for wisdom and strength and courage. After Mass, they are presented to the king and knighted. Don’t the dwarfs have a similar ceremony marking adulthood?”

“Yes, I have told you of it. We must show skill at crafting in some form, and skill at arms, and we pray to the All Father and the All Mother to make us strong and prosperous. Then we are given the right to wear the symbols of our clan as well as our family.”

“Very like then, except that our young men do not have to show a skill for crafting, only fighting and riding.”

“Well, if Ruegen had to show a crafting skill, he could easily do so,” she said, laughing, “so long as it was not to make verses!”

The knighting was held just before the troops who had been gathering outside the city were to leave to join the main army on the moors. There were some twenty candidates, but Ruegen, as blood kin to Father, was the first to kneel before him to receive the honor of knighthood. He wore a new tunic I had made for him, and as his closest female relative, I girded him with the new white belt denoting his status as a knight, while his father fastened on his golden spurs. Ruegen’s eyes sought out Nualla, though, and I was happy to see that she smiled happily at him and agreed to sit by him later at the feast.

The feast went on for hours; Rafe was hoarse with singing when he finally came and sat by my feet. It was nearly dark by then, and he had been singing all the new knights’ requests since the noon meal.

“You should sit at table and eat,” I said to him. “You have earned that, at least.”

“It’s their day for celebratin’,” he shrugged, but he did move into the chair beside me and accept the food that I signaled a page to bring and the cup of wine I poured for him. “Your cousin looks happy, now doesn’t he?”

“He does. He isn’t quite so drunk as some of the others.”

“He’s drunk on the dwarf maid’s smiles. A lady’s smile is headier than any wine, when it’s the right lady.” He smiled at me with a twinkle in his eye.

“Their course is almost as full of impediment as our own, you know,” I said softly, just for him.

“Aye. Here comes your father,” he said, rising to bow.

“Sit and eat, Tomas. You must have sung a hundred songs. I want both of you come to my study—not together—after a bit. The feasting can go on without us for a while, I think. I have some words to say to both of you.”

Rafe and I exchanged a long glance as Father left us. I finished my own cup of wine and then followed him after about five minutes.

“What is it, Father?” I asked when I reached the study, but he just smiled and said we should wait for Tomas.

Rafe soon arrived; Father waved us both to chairs by the fire. “I know you have been wondering why I left your identity a mystery, young man. Yes, I know who you are, and I have known since you brought the horse home a year ago.”

“How did you know, Father?” I asked him.

Father smiled at me. “I knew because I heard his voice before I saw his face, and I thought I was hearing a ghost. You sound for all the world like your grandfather, Your Highness,” he said, smiling at Rafe. “And you have your mother’s eyes. I remember her very well from when I was in Adaintire as a boy. She was only newly married then, and very beautiful. I think most of the young men in the court were at least a little in love with her.” His face went sad. “I grieved to hear of her troubles later.”

Rafe nodded his thanks. Speaking of his mother was still very painful for him. “And why have you kept your knowledge secret, Majesty?” he asked.

“Your grandfather was very fond of you, Rafe—oh yes, I know that’s what he called you. He wrote me often when you were at the court with him, after poor Tomas died. I never believed the charges your

father laid against you. I know it is hard for you to hear this, Highness, but your father was never a friend of mine. He always knew how to manipulate evidence to suit his own interests. And your grandfather was not unaware of that, but he did not imagine your father would actually usurp the throne from his own son.”

“He didn’t know my father as well as he thought, then,” Rafe said bitterly.

“Your grandfather always liked to believe that right would win out over wrong in the end. Perhaps his belief will be proved correct after all. In any case, I have something for you.” He turned to his desk and picked up a sword in a beautifully tooled and jeweled scabbard. “I always felt guilty that he had given me this. It belonged to one of his ancestors, and I promised him that someday I would give it back to you or to your son.” He drew the blade, which was etched with fine writing. “I should like to do more than that, Rafe, if you will agree.”

“What, Majesty?”

“You are going into battle for your own people, even though they don’t know you, and your name will not be spoken until you wish it to be. But you are a prince, and you will be a king. I would not send you into battle, secret or not, without the honor of your knighthood. Come, Rafe, kneel down here and let this ancient sword of your own people confer that honor.”

Rafe looked stunned; he glanced at me and no doubt saw that I was tearful with gratitude to my father. He slipped to his knees and bowed his head. The blade touched his right shoulder.

“St. Michael give you courage,” Father said, moving the blade to the left shoulder. “St. Andrew give you generosity of spirit.” The blade moved again, this time to touch the crown of Rafe’s bowed head. “St. Raphael grant that you may heal the wounds of your land.” Father raised the sword from Rafe’s head and brought the point to rest between his feet. “Rise up, Sir Andrew Rafael Daniel Tomas MacHanlan, knight and prince, and receive back this sword of your fathers in token that their land will once more be your land.”



Rafe rose, bowed, and took the naked sword on his open hands. He immediately knelt again and offered it hilt first to Father. "Accept my service, Your Majesty. I would be your man until such time as either you or death release me from that duty."

Father placed his hand on the hilt over Rafe's hands. "I accept not your homage but your friendship, Sir Rafael MacHanlan. I count you my fellow in every way but age. We will ride to war together." And he raised Rafe up with a smile. "Katherine, you must do your duty again by girding Rafe with the belt of his knighthood. You will find it there, on the desk."

I put the belt on Rafe and would have knelt to fit the spurs as well, but Father shook his head. "No, no spurs, Katherine. Rafe deserves them and will have them, but not tonight; even his belt must be hidden before he leaves this room." He waved us both to sit again, handing us wine cups and taking one for himself as he too sat. "Rafe must remain secret a while longer, and so must your true feelings for him." He smiled at both of us. "I have known of those too, since before you left us last spring, Rafe, with a song of promise to return home again—to the home of your heart. I do not disapprove, or I would never have allowed you even supervised time together, much less the moments under the gallery stair." Rafe and I glanced at one another with slightly guilty smiles; Father laughed a bit at us but not meanly. "I was young and in love once as well, you know."

"Then will you allow a betrothal, Father?" I ventured.

"When the time comes, yes, of course. That time is not now, though, Katherine. For one thing, it would require approval of the entire council, as you know, and it would have to be publically announced, and now is definitely not the time for that."

"I would like to give Rafe a token, Father. Will you allow that, at least?"

"Of course. I see nothing wrong with that," Father granted.

I slipped my naming-day medallion off my own neck and put the chain around Rafe's. "There now, Rafe—you carry me with you as you go."

Father nodded approval. "A worthy token," he agreed. "Now, Katherine, I need you to listen carefully. I want you to be very alert to



possible trouble at home while we are gone. I don't like leaving you here but can think of nowhere you would be safer."

"What are you expecting, Majesty?" Rafe asked, suddenly concerned.

"Say 'suspecting' rather than 'expecting.' I have no solid basis for the suspicion, just a wariness I cannot really explain. I may be jumping at shadows. But I want you to stay alert, Katherine, and if you feel unsafe, flee—but not eastward. If you need to leave here, make for Undine as directly as is possible and send word to me on Thiarcladach. I hope you will not need to do anything of the sort, but I am not entirely at ease leaving you here with Caledonia."

I nodded. "I'll keep that in mind, Father."

"You should bring Nualla with you if you leave the castle, Katherine. She is even less safe here than you, I should think. Her kin are leaving soon, but she stays for love of you—and Ruegen, of course."

"I'd do that in any case, Father."

"Good. Now, children, I must go back to the feasting, and you should come soon as well. Tomorrow noon we ride out. Say farewell to one another, but do not linger overlong."

He closed the door as he left. Rafe caught me in his arms for a kiss that was as bittersweet as it was heartfelt. In a day's time, he would be gone to war. I made sure he would remember that farewell kiss as long as I would.

## CHAPTER 21

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Probably the greatest surprise of the summer turned out to be that Lady Kunigunde would be a willing—indeed, eager—participant in my and Nualla’s assorted adventures. Perhaps the difference was that I was growing up and no longer saw her quite so much as part of the punishment Father had imposed for my rash behavior in running away. In any case, Nualla and I became aware of her true nature almost immediately after the troops had gone.

With the other ladies of the court, we watched the troops leave the castle and ride out of the town to join with the soldiers who had been gathering from the southern part of the country and camping outside the city walls by the lake. Once the vanguard of the king’s own household troops had arrived at the head of the column, the army moved out; inside an hour of Father leaving the castle, even the dust of the troops’ passage was gone. Nualla and I returned to the schoolroom with Lady Kunigunde.

“I believe we need a new project to occupy our time!” the governess announced in her usual ringing tones. “I have been searching the library and have found these!” She set down a stack of books with gold-tooled titles made up of dwarf runes. “Do you know these books, Nualla?”

“Yes, of course. They are sagas of my people. Every dwarf child learns these stories.”

“So I thought! Highness, do you not think learning a new language would suit you better than making a tapestry to while away the time your menfolk are on campaign?”

I gave her a genuine if slightly guilty smile. I had never openly expressed to Lady Kunigunde my dislike of the tapestry-making ladies in the tales of courtly love, but I had always felt it. “I think that is definitely better than working on a tapestry, Lady Kunigunde.”

“So do I!” she beamed. “Sewing should always be a pleasure, not a chore to idle time away! Besides, sewing occupies the hands but leaves the mind all too much time to worry over those we are missing.” She looked pensively out the window.

Nualla and I exchanged a glance. Baron Otto had gone with the troops, though he was to remain in Undine as an ambassador rather than go on to the islands. Clearly Lady Kunigunde was missing the baron as we were missing Rafe and Ruegen and Father.

Hence we began to learn the dwarf language from Nualla as we read in the dwarf sagas. Lady Kunigunde also went along to spend time with Mayda in the still room, in the herb gardens, and the areas by the lakeshore and in the edge of the forest where the wild plants Mayda needed for her remedies and medicines could be gathered. The governess proved to be very interested in the medicines and the other uses to which the dwarfs put plants.

Lady Kunigunde even succeeded in something no one else had accomplished: She not only got Nualla on a horse, but had her riding within a few days, not just in the paddock but out around the lakeshore. Within a few weeks, Nualla was taking longer rides and even taking easy jumps. The dwarf girl had ridden the mountain ponies, of course, but she had always insisted horses were too big. Lady Kunigunde ordered the grooms to find her a small horse to learn on; when the governess ordered a thing, people obeyed, so soon we three were riding daily. Mounting anywhere without a groom to provide a boost was a problem for me almost as much as it was for Nualla, but Lady

Kunigunde had us practice so many times using whatever we could find to stand on—rocks, tree stumps or fallen trunks, rock walls, fence stiles, even low hillocks—that we were soon able to dismount and remount with ease.

Lady Kunigunde was once again ever-present, however, and I had begun to chafe a bit until I received Father's letter from Undine, written just before he embarked for Thiarcladach. In it, he reminded me to be vigilant for any sign of trouble, and he also wrote, "I have asked Lady Kunigunde to stay alert as well. If she is with you more than is comfortable, please be patient and understand I asked this of her. Keep up your sword practice, Katherine. I hope you will have no need of using it, but it is better to be prepared and not need a sword than unprepared and defenseless."

A separate letter also sealed with Father's signet proved to be from Rafe. He too urged me to be watchful and to take all care if I were in danger. The letter did not seem much like a love letter, but I treasured it all the more for showing his real concern for me rather than being full of silly platitudes and meaningless words of admiration.

As summer approached, the dwarfs finished their work on the east wing of the castle and departed for the mountains or for Undine; a good party of dwarfs had come up from the mountains to travel to the islands to help rebuild harbor defenses where our ground troops and those of Dansine were reinforcing the local troops. Many of those who had been in Dansine and then at our castle and thus away from their families for a year traveled home, including all of the women; since this was neither a dwarf war nor a peaceable building project, Forngal had not arranged for any of the dwarf women to go with the men on this outing.

"It would put our women in danger needlessly. In our own camps, we can and do protect them, and if they must fight, they are fighting their own kind. In the building camps, they are not at risk of being

harmed either,” Torgas explained to me as the dwarfs prepared to depart, either for their mountain homes or the northern coast and the islands. “But when we go into a place where we may have to fight humans, we do not take our women, the future of our race.”

The arrival of the Slavs followed hard upon the departure of the dwarfs. Indeed, it was only two days after the dwarfs marched away, either east into the forest and then south toward the mountains or north and west toward Undine that Count Grzljnzki and a large group of his “servants” arrived.

“If those are servants, I would not care to see the warriors he could put in the field,” Nualla said to me as we walked past the hall where the huge Slavs were making themselves very much at home. “They do not even pretend to be the equals of those who are servants here, the grooms and footmen and so forth.”

“No, they don’t. I don’t care for the way they all stare at you, Nualla.”

“I do not like them,” she said. “There is old enmity between the dwarfs and the Slavs. Once, long ago, my ancestors had halls in the mountains between their lands and those that lie here in the west. The Slavs coveted the precious ores and jewels that were found there, and they drove my kin out and stole many of the treasures. And they made slaves of my ancestors—chained them like beasts, cut out their tongues to make them able only to bellow in pain like beasts when they tortured them further.”

“Dear God!” I shuddered. “How gruesome!”

“My ancestors repaid them hurt for hurt, as is the custom of the dwarfs. So there is no love between us.” She shivered slightly. “I would not like to fall into their hands as a prisoner, Kate.”

“That is not going to happen, Nualla. I can promise you that.”

Caledonia was all too friendly with the Slavs, particularly Count Grzljnzki. He was her cousin, of course, but there was something



unseemly about the intimacy of their postures when they stood or sat talking. I wondered if I were merely prejudiced against Caledonia by my own antipathy toward her and Father's resistance to putting her on his council, which to me indicated distrust of a serious nature. I had always known theirs was a political marriage, but even so Father's statements about Caledonia seemed to indicate more than just indifference. I also remembered his emphasis on my not fleeing eastward if I felt I needed to leave the castle again; the Slavic lands lay to the east. However, Nualla and Lady Kunigunde noticed the same appearance of too much intimacy.

"Ruegen is your cousin as well," Nualla pointed out. "But when you speak with him, you do not look as if all that lacks of an embrace is his arms around you."

Count Grzljnzki's residence in the castle was uncomfortable enough even before he began to ask me leading questions about what I had heard from my father. After he had been in the castle less than a full week, he seemed to lurk waiting to intercept me wherever I was. Every time I encountered him anywhere in the castle, he would be the soul of polite inquiry.

"Your Highness, I hope you are well?" he asked one day.

"I am quite well, thank you. Is there any reason I should not be well, my lord?"

"Only that you must miss your father and your cousin very much, Princess, and long to hear from them."

I gave him a little smile. "I am accustomed to having my father and cousin away these several years, my lord, since the border dispute in Dansine which lasted the better part of three seasons. As the daughter of a king, such occasions are only to be expected."

"How true! I hope all is well with your father and his troops?"

"I am sure your cousin, the queen, can tell you how they fare far better than I, my lord. My father's letters to me are generally full of such things as advice to remember to give the servants a little extra money on their birthdays and to be sure the new stable hands do

not slack on mucking out while he is away. He hardly ever tells me anything about the troops except to say they will all be glad to be home, as they are not used to hearing the sea all day and night and find the fog depressing and the wine less palatable than ours here in the South."

"Ah. I trust they will be home soon then. That your father would commit such large numbers to the defense of the islands remains something of a mystery to me as well as to the queen."

"Father spent some time in the islands when he was young," I said truthfully. "We are distant kin to the King of Glasmoire."

"I am told that all the islanders are akin."

"I believe that may well be true, my lord, but it was the King of Glasmoire that one of my ancestor's daughters wed some generations back, so that is the only kinship we claim."

"I understood your father was on Thiarcladach, however, not Glasmoire," he said.

"I think he knew the King of Thiarcladach as a boy, when he was in the islands," I answered. I did not care for the direction of the questioning, so I used the ancient defense of young people. "I don't really know. I admit I only half listen to stories about people I've never even met, and I can't always be sure who Father was talking about."

"Ah, that is always the problem of trying to instruct the young," he replied condescendingly. "They always ignore what they should listen to and recall only what they wish to hear."

"I fear you are right, my lord. If you will excuse me, I am due for a lesson with my governess even now. She will chastise me for tarrying to chat when she is ready to teach me about some old dead king or other." I gave him a tiny curtsy and hurried up to the schoolroom.

"What an odious man!" I told Nualla and Lady Kunigunde. "He's asking too many questions about Father's whereabouts and movements to suit me."

"Any are too many," said Lady Kunigunde, in what for her was a low tone. "Be very careful what you say, Highness."

"Never fear," I assured her. "If he asked me the kind of bread I had for breakfast, I would think twice before telling him wheat or barley. He looks like a walking cadaver, and he has those hawkish eyes of the queen's as well."

"Yes," Nualla shivered. "He makes me very uneasy when I see him watching me."

Lady Kunigunde lowered her voice to a whisper, something I would hardly have thought possible. "He has been watching you, Nualla?"

"Yes. I have seen him on the battlements sometimes when I have crossed the court or gone into the orchards. I can feel his eyes following me."

"That is very bad indeed. I don't like to think ill of anyone, but the count is not a man I would trust, and you say the grievances between your people and his are old and deep."

"Yes, that is so."

Lady Kunigunde sat back in thought for a moment, then looked at me. "Princess, how well can you hear what goes on in the hall from that cubbyhole under the stair that leads to the musicians' gallery?"

I know I turned at least six shades of scarlet while she smiled knowingly at me. I managed to choke out, "Well—um—fairly well."

"Good. I think it is high time to see if those Slavs are saying anything of interest while they lurk in the hall all day. How would you like to do a little eavesdropping, Highness?"

## CHAPTER 22

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The Slavs normally went out hunting in the early morning and came in for a late breakfast around two hours before the noon meal. They generally loafed in the hall the rest of the day. Lady Kunigunde had a plan to empty them out of the hall after their breakfast, so I snuck into my hiding place just as they returned clattering into the stable yard around ten in the morning. I hoped my study of the Slavic tongue would be sufficient to understand anything of significance I might hear.

The cubbyhole was definitely more comfortable for one person than for two, but I must say I would have welcomed the one it so strongly brought to mind. I sighed with some regret to be alone and sat down to wait.

For a good thirty minutes or more, I heard nothing of interest, just the normal jests and demands of men eating heartily, calling for more food or ale, and making lewd suggestions to the maids or boys who were serving food and drink. I was glad I was hidden, for I understood enough of the crude remarks to feel my face go hot with embarrassment.

After the servants had gone, there were more crude jokes and stories about some woman named Anja who apparently followed the oldest profession. I was getting bored when a new voice entered the mix from the hall. I recognized this one as belonging to Count

Grzljnzki's "valet," a man almost as tall, thin, and pale as his master. I assumed he was actually the count's lieutenant. His voice was not as loud as the others', but it was as cold as ice.

"His Lordship reminds you all that the girl is not to be harmed in any way. The fool among you who does so will pay with his life, and not in a pleasant manner, either. Is all in readiness?"

There were murmurs of assent. Then one of the others asked, "What of the dwarf?"

There was a cold, evil laugh. "His Lordship says we may have the dwarf bitch for our own amusement. We shall see how she likes the hounds, eh?"

There were howls of laughter and vulgar sounds that left little doubt what they meant to let the hounds do to Nualla. I shuddered and almost gagged on the bile that rose in my throat at the very thought.

"And what of the old harridan that guards them?" asked another of the men. "That one will never be quiet if we let her live."

"Deal with her," the icy voice said, "as you would deal with any interfering cow. Just be sure she will not be found before the girl is safely on the ship."

I had heard more than enough to scare me almost senseless, but I was trapped under the stairs until Lady Kunigunde could manage to distract the Slavs and somehow get them out of the way. Fortunately, the distraction came within half an hour. There was a great stir from the kitchen corridor, and a whole troop of maids and footmen, led by the housekeeper, came bustling into the hall making a great deal of noise banging pails, mops, brooms, and even shovels. The housekeeper was giving directions right and left.

"Kai, you and the others move these tables so we can clear the floor of these old reeds. They are full of grease and bones and all manner of dog hair. You men may go or help, but this hall must be cleaned. Greta, you and the other girls start with the high table first but scrub them all."



In the noise and confusion, I slipped out from under the stair and back toward the kitchens. Moments later, I was in the schoolroom reporting what I had heard. Lady Kunigunde frowned and paced. "This is worse than I feared, then," she said at last. "We must leave this castle, and we must do it as soon as possible."

"How can we go without being observed?" Nualla asked.

"I doubt very much that we can," Lady Kunigunde said. "I think we must go openly but misdirect attention from our real destination."

"How?" I asked.

"We will go on a mission to visit the sick. That will give us an excuse to leave the castle with some bundles and food. In some of the bundles, of course, you must take clothes, blankets, and your weapons. I will see to the food."

"We may be followed, if they truly mean to abduct me," I said.

"Probably so," she mused. "Why are you smiling, Princess?"

"The best way to avoid being followed is to take the follower along. I'll prepare a wineskin of drugged wine and ask Count Grzljnzki to send an escort with us, as we'll need someone to guard the horses and the other things once we reach the houses of the ones we are visiting."

"You are indeed devious, Princess," the governess smiled. "Hurry, get your bundles together, and we'll go immediately after the noon meal."

As I had expected, the count was lurking around the hall waiting for me to come down. He was as oily as ever. "Visit the sick?" he said. "Is that wise, Highness?"

"My mother made a custom of doing so, my lord. I should have been doing it long before this, but I confess I have not been the most generous of ladies. Indeed, I have been very selfish in the past. I hope that my efforts to be more like my mother will make me a better person from now forward."

"But surely you do not go alone?"

"Oh no, I never intended to do that. Lady Kunigunde and Nualla will go with me."

"I was thinking of a guard of some sort. Troubled times, you know, Highness."

"Oh, well—perhaps I should ask the garrison commander to send someone along," I said rather doubtfully, "though the guards are stretched rather thin with so many gone with Father."

"I will be glad to ask two of my servants to accompany you, Highness. They are idling away time." He seemed very eager to send them; he must have seen this as just the chance he was waiting for.

I gave him a grateful smile. "Would you really, my lord? That will be perfect. Thank you."

And so we rode out just after the noon meal, past St. Jerome's and down into the town. We made one stop at an old pensioner's house, stayed inside a few minutes, and moved on to a second stop where a young mother was having a hard recovery from the birth of twins. At the third stop, I offered the guards the wineskin into which I had put the sleeping potion. We moved on to a fourth stop and emerged to find both sound asleep by the wall of the house.

We had stopped at the fourth house purposely to let the guards fall asleep; the house itself was empty, and we quickly pulled them inside and tied them up. After I led the horses to the shed in the back of the house, we all changed our clothes before we rode back across the town to the north gate. We left the town dressed as males, our hair hidden under floppy caps similar to those Rafe had been wont to wear as part of his flamboyant costumes in Wittenbach. Had anyone been looking specifically for us then, the disguises probably would not have worked to hide us, but we were counting heavily on not being missed just yet. We further hoped that the guards had intended to snatch us during the afternoon, having been given a golden opportunity by my agreeing to have them escort us on our visits. They would be asleep for several hours, but by then we hoped to be far away from them and out of range of any pursuit.

We rode sedately out of the north gate and kept a moderate pace until the town was out of sight behind us. As soon as we felt safely

unobserved, we pushed the horses to a fast canter for several hours, until we had rounded the northern tip of the lake and found a road leading westward. We hoped to be well away, but almost at once we met a check. Schilling cast a shoe just about dusk, and we had to find a place to stay the night, as no smith was likely to be still at his anvil at that hour, nor did we dare rouse a town or farm to find one who would be willing to refire his forge so late.

When we went on the next morning, we soon found a smith willing to shoe the horse, but we also received a nasty shock. There were Slavs lounging on a bench outside the tavern across the dusty thoroughfare.

“What are they doing here?” I asked the smith, indicating the Slavs.

The smith, a taciturn individual, shot a frowning glance first at them, then at me. “Come a week or so ago, they did,” he said. “Said the queen hired ’em to keep the roads safe while the local troops are all away fighting some foreign war or the other. They sits about swilling ale and watching to see who’s traveling. Reckon that’s how they mean to keep the roads safe.”

I shot a look at Nualla and Lady Kunigunde. This was a wrinkle none of us had foreseen. How many of Count Grzljnzki’s troops had actually come with him in addition to those at the castle? How far from the castle had they spread out, and why?

“We’re going to need a better disguise,” I said softly to Lady Kunigunde. “They may be scattered all the way to the border.”

She nodded agreement. “We’ll get off the main road as soon as we’re out of sight of this village. I don’t fancy dodging them all the way across the north moors,” she whispered.

As soon as Schilling had his new shoe and all the shoes of all the horses had been checked, we went on our way, not appearing to hurry, but we were glad to have the village behind us and move along the road until we found another road running more or less north. Once we had gone a few miles along this road, Lady Kunigunde pointed to

a hill ahead with a stand of trees covering it. "There's no one in sight behind us, but let's get off the road for a little while and see if we were followed at a distance. I am extremely disturbed by the Slavs being here along the roads, whatever the reason."

"So am I," I agreed. "They're not here for any legitimate reason, and Father will want to know that as soon as possible."

"Indeed he will," she nodded. "Come, we'll let the horses stand a while and listen for any pursuit."

I was about to decide Lady Kunigunde had the makings of a good spy herself, if she hadn't been so very large and noticeable. We waited only a few minutes before a group of the Slavs rode by in the direction we had been going. I said a very unladylike word I had picked up from Rafe.

"Highness, I am shocked," said the governess repressively. "But I do think we need to consider our options a bit more at this juncture. I feel very uneasy about riding on behind that group. They may not be looking specifically for us, yet—"

"They may be," I finished glumly. "If Count Grzljnzki has men all over the countryside, he may also have messengers riding out to let them know we're missing."

"Yes, indeed."

I sighed and turned to dig into my saddlebag. "Well, I have a map. I don't want to follow that group, but I also don't feel safe going back to the other road. Let's see where we are and where we need to be."

Nualla and Lady Kunigunde urged their horses closer so we could all three study the map; our concentration on that document distracted us from watching our surroundings. We were unaware of being observed and unaware even of the man himself until he spoke.

"Highness, they call you," he said, his hand already on the reins of my horse. "So the princess is wandering again, is she?"

I had a flutter of *déjà vu*, but this man bore no resemblance to Rafe as I had first seen him. This man was dark; his hair was long enough to tuck behind his ears, where gold rings gleamed. His teeth were very

white in his dark face, and he wore the bright shirt and tight leather breeches of the Gypsies who often came to trade their wares and horses at the fairs in the fall and spring. The knife in his hand was very businesslike for all his seeming nonchalance. Other Gypsies seemed to melt out of the woods around us to grasp the reins of Nualla's and Lady Kunigunde's horses as well. The speaker's grin held mirth for our discomfort.

"You do not want to stay here, Highness, until the Slavs come back. How lucky for you that we are here to be sure that you do not! Our queen will be pleased, I think, to welcome a royal visitor." His laugh was amused, but I thought it was not an amusement meant to be shared by the three of us.



## CHAPTER 23

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The Gypsies led the horses through the trees in silence for some minutes, long enough for me to recall all I knew about the wandering people who claimed no land but roamed the continent and the Island Kingdoms in painted caravans, moving where and when they would. I had seen them at the fairs most of my life, trading horses and various things they had made. No one trusted them entirely; they were reputed to be thieves of the first order, liable to take anything not securely locked away, including wandering children. I'd heard that mothers sometimes threatened unruly children that they would be sold to the Gypsies if they didn't behave, and that Gypsies had been known to buy children or even kidnap them and sell them back to distraught parents.

Many other tales about the Gypsies were told, and some were undoubtedly true. They did not stay in the town if they came to the fairs, but camped by the lakeshore some distance away. Men would often go to their camps by night to watch the girls dance, but anyone foolish enough to try to seduce one of these girls was likely to find himself surrounded by a ring of her male relatives wielding deadly knives. Women from the town also went to the camps sometimes to seek out the fortune-tellers to learn whether a lover was faithful or whether a longed-for child would in fact be born. Sometimes the Gypsies sold love potions or good luck charms as well. The one fact

I knew to be true was that none who visited the camps ever came away with many coins in his or her pockets. The Gypsies were keen bargainers and charged dearly for their services.

When we arrived at the camp, the man leading my horse called out to a woman and a man; the man came at once to take all three horses as those leading them indicated by gesture that we were to dismount. The woman, seated on a stool under an awning stretched outside one of the larger caravans, just waited for our captors to lead us to her. This, I assumed, was the queen; I knew that their rulers were all women, and though this woman was dressed like many others I had seen in the past and saw now in the camp, she had an air of command that struck me at once.

The man who had spoken to us spoke rapidly to the woman using a language unknown to me. She studied us as he spoke, her dark, inscrutable eyes never leaving us for a second. Close up, I saw that she was, in fact, quite elderly, though her back was as straight as a girl's, and her long, loose hair was still dark, with only a strand or two of gray. She began to grin after a bit, not a pleasant smile, but a calculating one. She studied me in particular. Clapping her hands, she spoke to the other men in the escort and then said in a language I recognized, "The dwarf maiden and the woman are to be taken to the caravans of my sons. The princess I will speak with." She nodded to the men, who led my friends away. The one who had spoken to us fetched a stool for me and then departed quickly, leaving me to face the old woman.

"I am called Atalaya," she said imperiously. "We do not use the titles of the kingdoms of the continent and the islands. You are the Princess Snow White."

"I have other names, but that one is best known, yes." I had always heard it was unwise to try to lie to a Gypsy.

"It will do, then. Your father—he will not wish you harmed."

"No, he will not," I agreed.

Her lips curved in a smile that did not reach her eyes. "Be sure you do nothing foolish, Snow White. Your father is not the only person

who would pay well to have you in his hands. Your friends will be hostages for your behavior.”

“So you mean to ransom me to my father?”

“He will pay handsomely for the privilege of seeing you again, I think.”

My anger must have shown in my face, for the next smile was amused. “You are angry, but do not let it lead you to foolishness. The Slavs would like very much to have you; they would like even more to have the dwarf maiden. You do not wish that to happen.”

“You would sell her to them, when you know what they would do to her?” I was furious.

The old woman shrugged. “Would the dwarfs not do the same to my people? Perhaps not to the Slavs, but to any other dwarf clan that wanted one of my people for taking one of their precious treasures. If you want to live in a perfect world, Snow White, where no one you love is ever hurt or betrayed, you must find another one than this. Chance has given you into our hands, and we believe in doing what is best for our people. You will bring a handsome price from one buyer or another. Your own actions will determine which buyer that will be.”

She called to someone within the caravan; a woman emerged and handed me a cup of wine.

“Drink, Snow White,” the old woman said. “You may recognize the drug; it will not harm you, as you know. I wish you dreamless sleep.”

She was right; I recognized the drug as a strong sleeping draught as I choked the bitter dose down. I had eaten nothing for hours, so the drug took effect almost at once; I was already groggy before the woman who had given me the wine had led me to a caravan just a few yards away. She indicated that I should lie down on a low couch against one wall; I had little choice, since I was about to fall down anyway. By the time she closed the half door as she left the caravan, I was well on the way to unconsciousness.

The next several days remain a blur to me. I was intermittently allowed to regain consciousness so I could stagger to primitive sanitary

facilities on the edge of the daily camps. They brought me food of some sort from time to time, but always there was an additional dose of the sleeping potion to choke down. I knew from the direction of the sun each late afternoon that we were moving northward and westward, though I was, of course, never awake when we were actually moving. However, the landscape kept changing from day to day; the trees changed from conifers to hardwoods, then diminished almost entirely. The land changed from rolling hills to flat plains, and the water sources for the camp varied from streams to lakes to a broad river. I had no idea where we were, but we seemed to be moving toward Undine, anyway.

At some point—I'm not sure just when—someone changed my boy's clothing for the traditional Gypsy garb for a girl my age—a bright embroidered blouse and a full circle skirt of crimson. I found it ironic that I should be hidden in the Gypsy camp from any possible outsiders, dressed in a costume so similar to the one I had worn for my birthday masquerade ball.

I saw nothing of Nualla or Lady Kunigunde in all that time, nor would those who attended—or guarded—me respond in any language to the questions I put to them about my companions. Either they did not speak any of the languages I tried, or they had been ordered not to speak to me at all. In any case, I seldom got past one or two questions before the Gypsy who had brought food or led me to the privy was gone; my mind was so befuddled with the constant dosing that I could not seem to think coherently enough to put words into any but the most basic sentences.

Captivity by the Gypsies was no more palatable than captivity by the Krellerin dwarf Durstig had been. Perhaps this was a little less physically painful because I was not shackled, but the constant imbibing of the drug drained both my energy and my will to resist. My worry over my friends' fate gnawed at me whenever I was awake and began to invade even my drugged stupor. My own imagination, enhanced by the drug I suspect, summoned up scenes of horror



with my friends being tortured or killed or sold as slaves. Even in the grip of the drug—or perhaps especially so—I saw over and over unbelievably cruel acts perpetrated on Lady Kunigunde and Nualla while I struggled to come to their aid but could neither move nor cry out to their tormentors.

Throughout all my drugged dreams, the cadaverous face of Count Grzljnzki floated beside that of the Gypsy Atalaya and the hawk-like visage of Caledonia. Why my brain linked the three I could not imagine, but they seemed to perform some sort of macabre dance in my dreams, sometimes singly, sometimes together. And behind them all, there was another presence, whether male or female I could not determine, nor did this presence have either a face or a name.

After several doses, I either developed some measure of tolerance to the drug or—more likely—they stopped making the doses quite so strong. I began to have at least a few moments of wakefulness between the dose and the descent of total unconsciousness. While in some ways this was a hopeful sign, in others it afforded me cause for even greater alarm. I began to hear the Gypsies talking when they obviously assumed I was back in my stupor; what I heard did nothing to ease my concern for myself or my friends.

For one thing, they spoke a language I could understand but not one which comforted me. They spoke a dialect of Slavic very close to that of the odious Count Grzljnzki and his “servants.” I knew that the Gypsies ranged the entire continent and the islands; that this particular group was one that had spent a great deal of time in the Slavic regions seemed rather ominous. Gypsies, it was generally known, would do almost anything for money. I wondered if we had escaped the Slavs only to be captured by their allies. I tried hard to recall whether Atalaya had ever said for sure that she meant to ransom me to my father. I could not remember much of our conversation, but I had at first been reassured somewhat by the fact that we were moving north and west, not east.



Many of the words I heard and understood seemed to be for perfectly ordinary things to do with the camp: *bak* (horse), *kocsi* (wagon), *tabortu* (campfire), *ennivalo* (food). A few puzzled me, though. Why would they speak of a *hao* (ship) and of a *torzsvezer* (overall commander)? Moving toward the coast might explain “ship,” but I could not understand “commander,” especially when the tone of the word was always a wary one. Gypsies were seldom afraid of anyone; that they should speak of this commander with that touch of fear made me wonder just who and what he might be.

We had stopped for the night again; dusk was falling as I had my few minutes at the privy. I swallowed my bit of food and cup of wine. The knife in my guard's hands was a definite reminder that I had better do so without protest. Hence I fell asleep again as darkness deepened, just as music began from the fiddlers playing for the dancers. My benumbed mind knew there was some significance to the music and the dancers, but I could not put the meaning into words before I fell again into the somnolent state.

In my dreams, I heard dwarf language and saw Durstig, alive and evil, kicking Nualla, chained at his feet. Then Nualla became Rafe. He looked at me and whispered, “Don't worry, darlin'; you'll be all right.” Then Durstig kicked him again, this time in the face.

I tried to wake up, tried to get to him but could not move. Suddenly I felt warm, skillful lips on my own, felt myself lifted and carried in strong arms. Then I was on a horse; the same strong arms were holding me before their owner, and the horse was moving fast.

“Is she going to be all right?” I heard Nualla ask. I was lying flat on an uncomfortably lumpy surface that on some level I realized was the ground.

“I think so,” Lady Kunigunde's voice answered Nualla. “She seems to have been heavily drugged, however.”

“Aye, she had to be,” said Rafe's voice. “She tasted of the bitter stuff.”

I pried my eyes open in time to see Lady Kunigunde giving Rafe a seriously reproving glare. He returned her glare with an impudent grin.

"What are you doing here?" I tried to ask in a normal voice. It came out as a croaking half-whisper.

Rafe slid his arm under my shoulders and gently lifted me to a sitting position as if I were a limp rag doll; to be truthful, that's about how I felt. "I'm rescuin' you, o' course. Here, darlin', have a swig o' this." He lifted a flask to my lips and poured a mouthful of the disgusting stuff into my mouth. I choked and sputtered, but I swallowed a bit of it.

"That's worse than the drug they gave me!" I exclaimed. "Take it away!"

"Now, Kate, you must drink a bit more," Nualla said mildly. "You know the potion; Mayda taught us to make it. It's only chicory and St. John's Wort."

"Well, it tastes terrible," I complained, but I took two more swallows. "Surely that's enough."

"Probably so," Rafe said. He slid his other arm under my knees and lifted me as he stood. "We've a bit further to ride, but we needed to get you at least somewhat awake." He boosted me onto a horse—my own Schilling, in fact—and mounted behind me. Lady Kunigunde and Nualla were also mounting up.

"But I want to know—"

"Later, darlin'," Rafe said into my ear. "Feel the wind in your hair and my arms holdin' you. Is that not enough for now?"

I couldn't think of anything else that could possibly be better, in fact, so I relaxed into his embrace and murmured, "It's more than enough." I sighed. "It's heaven."

## CHAPTER 24

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Wind in my face, even a dash of rain, but most of all knowing I was free and in Rafe's arms made the night ride hardly long enough to satisfy me; still, the mild stimulant of which I had swallowed only a small amount could hardly counteract days of the sleeping potion, and I drowsed a bit, safe in Rafe's embrace. I woke more fully when we rode into the paved yard of an inn—a posting inn from the size of the stables. Rafe swung down at once and lifted me from my perch on Schilling's back. Grooms had run out to hold the horses so the others could dismount as well. The innkeeper himself bustled out and led us to a private parlor opposite the common room.

“Will the ladies want to wash and freshen up?” he inquired.

“The ladies will,” Lady Kunigunde answered for all of us. “As soon as possible.”

The innkeeper nodded and leaned out the door to call. “Bett! Bett! Come along, girl! Take these ladies up to their room and fetch them water and towels.”

The girl Bett, about my age, eyed us with wonder but hurried to lead us to a good-sized bedchamber upstairs and was soon back with a copper of steaming water and a second girl laden with towels and a pail of cold water as well. Washing my face had never seemed like such a luxury, and it also helped me wake up completely.

When we returned to the parlor, we found the table laden with a wide assortment of food, everything from a bowl of berries and cream to a joint of beef as well as bread and butter, honey, and some cold chicken. Rafe rose at once and came to the door to take my hand. "Come and eat now, darlin'," he said. "It'll do you a world o' good to have some wholesome food not soaked in that sleepin' draught."

"That was in the wine they always gave me," I told him. "But I'm hungry too. I didn't eat much; I kept falling asleep."

"They did not feed us much either," said Nualla. "Though we were not drugged after the first day."

"They knew we would do nothing to endanger the princess further," Lady Kunigunde explained to Rafe, who had seated himself beside me and was eating too.

"They made sure we knew she was being drugged and that it would be too easy to exchange poison for the sleeping potion," Nualla nodded.

"They'll be sorry they got involved in this before I'm done with the lot o' them," Rafe said darkly.

"How did you come to find us?" I asked him.

"Let's wait for the others to tell the full tale," he said. "They'll want to hear your part, and we'll be wantin' to hear what happened at the camp after we got away."

"What others?" I inquired.

"Ruegen and a troop o' his men from Kurtzheim, and Torgas and a company o' dwarfs," he grinned. "The dirty Slavs that were there to fetch you got more than they bargained for, I wager."

"Slavs?"

"Aye—ah, that'll be them now." We all heard the clatter of more horses from the inn yard and soon the sound of many feet entering the inn, the landlord directing someone to the parlor and others to a room above. Rafe rose as Ruegen and Torgas entered the parlor. Nualla sprang up with a cry at the sight of Ruegen; his face was smeared with blood, obviously from a wound under the bandage over one eye. A



sling made from a Gypsy shawl held his left arm immobile, and more blood had soaked through the bright blue cloth from a wound on his shoulder.

Torgas pulled out a chair for Ruegen, then turned to the innkeeper who was hovering at the door. "Bring a basin of water and some bandages, please. My cousin will tend this man's wounds. The battle surgeon will tell you what he needs above for the others."

"Ruegen, are you all right?" I insisted, also going to him.

"I'll live, Kate. It's not deep, just bloody. The head wound is nothing. Nualla, love, don't take on so. I'm fine. What about the three of you?"

"We are not wounded, and Kate is better also. Sit still, Ruegen. Rafe, give him some of that wine. He's going to need stitching up. Torgas—"

"I'll find you a needle," the dwarf nodded and departed. He returned with what Nualla needed just as the serving girl Bett brought in the water and bandages. Nualla bathed Ruegen's wounds and smeared on some ointment before replacing the head bandage with a clean one. Then she stitched the gaping wound on Ruegen's left shoulder. He sucked in his breath sharply when the needle went in the first time but screwed up his face and endured the rest without a sound until he let out a great sigh as she put the needle down. He even managed to smile up at her.

"Thank you, love. I should do now."

"You had better not do *this* again, Ruegen von Kurtzheim!" she ordered him as she tied off the bandage. "I do not want to be forever sewing up holes in you!" And now that the crisis was over, she burst into tears, her hands over her face.

Looking rather alarmed, Ruegen used his good arm to pull her close to him. "Nualla, don't, love. I'm all right." He pulled her onto his knees, murmuring softly to her as she sobbed against his chest.

Rafe looked from them to me, nodding to the seat beside him and raising an eyebrow at me. I laughed and joined him, but I settled for letting him take my hand. "That seems to be settled, don't you think?" I whispered to him.



"It appears to be, aye," he said, smiling. "That's at least one question answered."

"That's the only one, then," I said, seriously.

"Aye. Torgas, what other casualties?" he asked the dwarf.

"One man and one dwarf dead," Torgas said somberly. "Margus will recover, but he'll limp for life. One of Ruegen's men has a broken leg and arm and quite likely several ribs. A horse fell on him. Cuts and bruises otherwise. All in all, not as bad as it could have been, given the size of their force over ours."

"There were about twenty o' the Slavs. What of the Gypsies? Did they fight or run?"

"They just faded away. They were fighting the fire, of course, when we attacked the Slavs—who made no effort to help with the fire. The Gypsies put out the fire and disappeared. By now, they have re-hitched the wagons and are well away, I would say."

"Undoubtedly," Rafe agreed. "How in the world did they manage to capture you, Kate?"

"Pure carelessness," I admitted. "We were hiding from the Slavs. We wanted to know if they were following us, so we stopped in the woods to wait and see if they rode by, which they did. We were concentrating on the map to look at our options, and the Gypsies surrounded us unawares. I only figured out in the last couple of days they must have been working with the Slavs all along."

"How did you find us—is it Rafe or Tomas?" Lady Kunigunde asked.

He laughed a bit sheepishly. "It's either, m' lady, though 'Rafe' seems to have come to the forefront now."

She gave him a speculative look, then nodded. "The king knows who you are, of course."

"He does indeed, and knew it a long time before he let me know he did."

"Answer the first question, Rafe," I urged him. "How *did* you find us?"

"You surely didn't think your father left you all on your own, Kate? He left Ludger orders to let him know what was happenin' at home."

"Ludger! How—?"

"Don't you know about Ludger and his lady friend that keeps pigeons?" he asked, smiling.

"Well, yes, but—"

"The pigeons are carriers, o' course. They fly across the lake to a posting inn and a messenger leaves from there."

"I had no idea!"

"O' course, not. That's the whole notion o' spyin', Kate. No one's supposed to know," he grinned. "Anyway, Ludger had sent the first message when Count Grzljnzki arrived, and then a second to let the king know about the rovin' Slavs all over the countryside. When you disappeared as well, Ludger was in a panic, for he didn't know if the Slavs had you or not, for he was sure you didn't know about the ones roamin' the roads."

"We didn't," I said. "We chanced on them when Schilling cast a shoe, and there was a group of them lounging outside the inn across from the smithy. That's why we stopped in the woods to see if we were being followed."

"Well, o' course, when I knew you were in danger, I said I was comin' to find you on my own. And I would have, if Ruegen hadn't tried to take my head off for my impudence."

"You might have explained matters to me, Kate," Ruegen complained. "Not that I could have taken his head off, as he's by far the better swordsman."

"Ah, I'm not. You were just that surprised when I showed you Kate's medallion about my neck," Rafe said to him. "I'm verra glad you gave it to me, darlin'. It kept him from killing me, anyhow."

"Fortunately, your father seems to have filled Papa in more fully than you did for me," Ruegen said. "We must have been pretty loud, for Papa heard us and came to find out what was going on. He was

going to send us out with just a small patrol, so we could move faster, you know. But then Torgas showed up and told us about the Slavs that had landed on the coast and were moving inland to some sort of meeting to collect an important hostage.”

“We know all too well the treachery of the Slavs,” Torgus said. “They landed near one of the towers we were helping reinforce. When Slavs are involved, we do not let them travel unobserved, so we learned of their plans.”

“Papa put the two facts together very rapidly,” Ruegen said. “Holding you as a hostage would force us out of the mix against these Northmen. So Papa sent a slightly larger force, including several of the dwarfs.”

“We didn’t know about the Gypsies until we followed the Slavs to their camp,” Rafe said. “It was obvious they were on good terms, and Torgas here did some discreet searching o’ their wagons while the Gypsies were busy with dancin’ and the Slavs busy watchin’. He found Nualla and Lady Kunigunde tied up but otherwise unharmed in one of the caravans, and they told him where you were.”

“They made a point of showing us you were helpless, Princess,” said Lady Kunigunde, “and reminding us daily that the cup they gave you could as easily hold death as sleep.”

“I was afraid you were dead at first,” Rafe confessed. “You were barely breathin’ when I knocked the Gypsy over the head with my sword and got in the caravan, after Ruegen set fire to one on the other side of the camp to distract everyone.”

“Rafe got the three of you away to safety, and the rest of us attacked the Slavs,” Torgas finished. “But then a second group of Slavs showed up from the south, and we were outnumbered about two to one. If the Gypsies had joined in the fight, we would never have fought them off.”

“Were they the same sort as were there to begin with?” Rafe asked. “The ones we followed were northern Slavs.”

“The others were southerners,” Ruegen answered. “Grzljnzki’s at a guess.”

“Damn! That *is* bad. They usually fight among themselves worse than they fight anyone else. If they’re allied, things could get *verra* ugly.”

“Things are ugly already,” I said. “When else do the Gypsies ever cooperate with anyone?”

“Aye, you have a point,” Rafe agreed. “Why are they now?”

“I got to the point I stayed awake a bit longer than they thought,” I said. “I heard them talking about some ‘supreme commander.’ *Torzsvazer* was the word they used. And they seemed to be afraid of him, Rafe.”

“Now that is remarkable,” Torgas said. “The Gypsies show fear of no one. To fear another is the one thing they think dishonorable.”

“Well, they certainly spoke of whoever this is as if they were bound to do his bidding, and afraid not to.”

Rafe frowned, nodding. “Well, we thought the Northmen had a leader who was able to pull them all under one banner. Seems he may be able to pull more than just the Northmen together.”

“And if he can unite the Slavs,” Torgas said, “he is very powerful and dangerous indeed.”

“He is that,” Rafe agreed. “I think we’d all better get some sleep. We need to leave early and ride hard. Baron Otto and the kings all need to know this. I’m thinkin’ we’re all in for a long, hard summer.”

## CHAPTER 25

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Even leaving early and riding hard, the trip to Undine lasted until well after dark the next day. Baron Otto took one look at our exhausted party and declared that nothing good would be accomplished by making us stay up even later to tell our tale. "Everyone to bed!" he ordered. "We'll meet for breakfast and talk then."

His decision was a good one; the next morning, we were all more alert and able to explain quickly all that had happened. I was amazed that Baron Otto seemed able to follow the conversation quite easily at a pitch only slightly louder than ordinary speech. Some potion Mayda had made for him to put in his ears had apparently done wonders; it had made him a lot less skeptical about Ruegen's attachment to Nualla, too. I made a private note to find out what the potion was.

Time to appreciate such minor miracles was limited, however. With the warming weather, the raiders were once again harrying the islands and now also the coastline of the northern kingdoms. Ships from Undine had already fought two battles against the far faster raiders not far to the west, and word from the islands was of several raids on Oithiar Sciath and Adainttire in the past few weeks, and isolated raids on all the other islands as well.

"Why Adainttire?" I asked, with a look at Rafe.

"That we need to know." Baron Otto nodded. "Are you ready to go now to see what you can discover?" he asked Rafe.



“Aye, I’ll go tonight on the evenin’ tide, now I know Kate’s safe here with you, m’ lord.”

“Good then. Ruegen, as soon as your shoulder’s healed, I want you to go along with Torgas to watch the coast eastward. If the Slavs are involved, we need double the eyes eastward.”

“Of course, Papa. How many men do you want me to take?”

“Better take at least twenty. I don’t like dealing with the Slavs, especially if they’re allied with this devil that’s directing the Northmen. We need to find out who he is and what hold he has on all these different groups that usually fight among themselves. God help us if this becomes a general war over the entire coastline and continent as well.”

“What would you like us to do, Uncle?” I asked.

He looked at me speculatively for a long moment, then nodded. “You look as innocent as a rose, Kate, but Lady Kunigunde says you have a gift for languages. I want you to use it. You should go shopping every day in the markets and see what you can overhear. No one here should suspect that you understand the local language or those of the islands and the Slavs too. There are plenty of Slavs here—fur traders and other merchants. See what you can hear, but don’t put yourself in any danger. Lady Kunigunde and Nualla will go along with you as a cover and a protection. The more spoiled and frivolous you can act, the better your cover will be. Can you manage that?”

“I can be a Berta!” I agreed; both Nualla and Rafe burst out laughing.

“Aye, that’ll be perfect,” Rafe agreed. “They don’t have a brain among them. No one would ever guess you were listenin’ to a word.”

“What am I to listen for, Uncle?” I asked.

“Anything might be important, so try to recall what you hear but especially about the islands. They’re still the key to all of this. If the Northmen take the islands, they’ll have a base too close to the northern coast to keep them from running us over entirely, not to

mention the havoc they'll wreak on the islands and their people in the process."

"Barron Otto's a canny man," Rafe commented as we sat alone in the small garden of the house now serving as our embassy in Undine. Everyone had been tactful in allowing us time alone to say good-bye before he left for Adaintire. "I want you to be *verra* careful, Kate. I don't like to think what might happen if you're found out to be spyin'. And I won't be on hand to come after you this time."

"I'll remember. I want you to do the same, Rafe. If you should be caught on Adaintire—"

"I managed it last summer well enough, and I didn't even have lovely dark hair then, nor the beard. I should be fine; one minstrel's much like another in the islands."

"So you've told me. But I still want you to be careful."

"Aye, o' course. How long does this dye last in my hair?"

"Depends how often you wash it, but you'd be safe to use it once a week to keep the new growth from being a different color."

"So how do you like me as a dark-haired man?" he teased.

"Well, I'm rather fond of that straw-colored mop of yours," I told him. "Now you look like anyone else."

"Aye, and that's a good thing," he reminded me.

"But you smell like walnut hulls," I teased in my turn.

"I have to go, Kate," he said regretfully. "I have my own part to play in all this."

"I know. I love you. Be careful."

After a few long—but not long enough—kisses, he slipped out the side gate and hurried off down the street. I ran up the steps to the top of the wall to watch him as far as I could. He looked like any traveling musician with his instruments across his back. He turned at the corner and waved, then vanished. I had not been aware of Ruegen even being there until he put his arm around my shoulders and squeezed them.

“He’ll be all right, Kate,” he told me. “He’s a good man.”

“I know he is, Ruegen, but even good men get hurt sometimes.” I touched his left shoulder. “There’s your proof of that.”

“Well, maybe so. That’s yet to be seen. That’s why we need good care and medicines. Nualla wants you to help her in the still room. She’s brewing up some medicines for the dwarfs to take back to their posts tomorrow, just in case.”

“I’ll go help her then,” I agreed. “I need to be doing something useful instead of brooding about the danger Rafe’s sailing into on Adaintire.”

I prepared for my role as a spoiled princess by demanding the services of the best dressmaker in the city and being as fussy as possible about the clothes she was to make for me. After that, I went on to other shops and stalls and made rude comments about the goods and services available, then rounded out the morning by throwing a temper tantrum at the fruit stall because there were no peaches.

“I don’t want any berries!” I shouted at the vendor. “What sort of fruit seller are you, not to have any peaches? I *always* eat peaches at this time of year! You have to have peaches!”

“Your Highness, peaches are not yet in season this far north. You are accustomed to the southern markets, where they have peaches far sooner than here.”

“Well, send for some!”

“Your Highness, they would spoil before they could get here from the south. Peaches do not ship well.”

“What a horrible place!” I complained loudly to Lady Kunigunde; she and Nualla were, of course, with me. “No one speaks a civilized language, and none of the shops have what I want. I wish we’d stayed at home!”

As she apologized to the shopkeeper, I chose some other fruit and ordered Nualla to put it in her basket. I ordered her around like the lowest sort of servant. “Mind you don’t get any of the fruit juice

on that lace I bought. It's not the best lace I've ever seen, but I don't want it stained before it's even used."

Back in the embassy, I relaxed my pout. "Well, if word goes around, by tomorrow I should have just the reputation I need to be effective at listening in on conversations."

"You act this part far too well, Kate. Is it possible you used to be a spoiled princess?" Nualla teased me.

"I probably was, actually, though not a rude one. Father wouldn't have allowed such behavior, as you might well imagine," I laughed. "He'll be appalled if he finds out how I'm acting in public now, even if it was Uncle Otto's idea."

"I hope it works."

"So do I. We need information about this commander and his plans. I want this war over and done with and everyone I love safe at home."

I kept up the complaining, spoiled princess act for two more days, then switched to sulky silence. I feigned indifference to anything Lady Kunigunde showed me and sighed loudly every time she interrupted my silent brooding. This became my normal mode of public appearance, up to and including my one visit to the court of the King of Undine. I was sufficiently unpleasant to the queen and her ladies in waiting and the several young children that I did not receive another invitation, which suited me fine. Not long following that one visit, the queen took the children inland to stay at their summer palace, which also suited me. My main concern was to do anything and all I could to help end the threat of the Northmen and the Slavs, and visits to the palace were no help at all.

My act began to pay off slowly; at first the tidbits I managed to overhear were simply the same news I had already heard from Baron Otto over breakfast every day. He always had his morning meal with us in my apartment within the embassy, giving us the news from the dispatches of the previous day and the early morning. One thing that quickly became apparent, however, was that common rumor was



spreading the news as fast as the military dispatches. In fact, I heard of some raids before the dispatches arrived, especially those on islands where Father and his allies had no ground troops reinforcing the local armies.

The first real breakthrough of my efforts was so subtle that I didn't even realize at first that it was going to prove vastly important. I heard the words *ruska* and *vakeva* separately a number of times and wasn't sure of their meaning or context. It was not until I heard them in combination with other names I knew, including Father's and those of other kings, that I realized that those words too had to designate a person or persons. I reported this to Baron Otto at once, of course.

"*Ruska*," he mused. "It's not a name I know, but then this mysterious leader is no one that is known. *Vakeva* could be a title or another part of the same name. At least now we have a starting point. Other people collecting information in other places can start to listen for the name, can even drop the name innocently and see what happens. This could be vital, Kate. Well done."

"Do you think so, Uncle?" I asked.

"Absolutely," he assured me. "If we stop this leader, we stop the whole lot of them. What hold he has on them is hard to discover until we know a great deal about him. He has united forces that have spent decades, even centuries fighting one another and so never really constituted a threat to anyone else. We need to know how he's done that in order to loosen that hold he has on them. The secret is somewhere in his past, and to find the past, we have to have a name. Keep listening, Kate. You may hear more names or other things we can use to unmask this enemy."

So I continued my daily trips to the markets, varying my behavior there as the occasion demanded. I was imperious and demanding one day, sulky for several more, and I went into all the shops and stalls at one time or another, though I frequented most often those of the Slavs and the islanders, for I expected to overhear things that were either important or interesting otherwise in those establishments.



My learning the name of Vakeva Ruska coincided with greatly increased activity of the raiders and a flood of reports on multiple raids in one night. The fleet of the Northmen's ships seemed to have doubled or tripled; no one had an accurate count of the ships now. They were simply everywhere at once and in staggering numbers. Instead of reports of raids on one or two places on one of the islands in a single night with two or three ships each, reports now came of ten or more raids on a given island. This sort of pounding could not go on unchecked without disastrous results; within a week of the beginning of the multiple raids, both Scathoithiar and Talamhdarien had capitulated to the raiders' demands. The presence of the raiders on Talamhdarien directly challenged Father and the other allies helping to defend Thiarcladach, Glasmoire, and Larnaofa. The raiders on Scathoithiar threatened both Coir Inis and Adaintire, but neither could expect help from the other islands or the allies pinned down by ships of the raiders in every strait and channel between the different Island Kingdoms. If Adaintire and Coir Inis were to withstand the raiders, they would have to do so on their own, and that now seemed all the more unlikely.

I was desperate for news from Rafe, but none had come for several weeks. He had already been in danger from his father's decree of outlawry; was he now also in danger of being overcome by the raiders? I worried constantly and hoped every day for some news of his whereabouts and safety. More than anything, I wanted him safely back with me, whatever it took to get him there.

## CHAPTER 26

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As the news of the raids grew increasingly distressing, I longed to know what was happening on Adaintire, especially what Rafe was doing and how he was faring. I worried more than I would admit to anyone, even Nualla. No news came directly from him, but with the fall of Scathoithiar, news from the island itself grew increasingly grim. My nerves were stretched near the breaking point when a whisper of rumor about Rafe himself surfaced.

Again, it was a little thing that gave a hint of a much larger and more sinister picture than any of us had imagined. In a stall that sold linen from the islands, I was doing my usual sulking routine while Lady Kunigunde patronized another shop across the narrow street. I overheard the word *garmhac*, “grandson” and the expression *seanri*, “old king.” This sounded like a reference to Rafe and his grandfather, so I listened harder. In the next few days, Lady Kunigunde developed a passion for fine linen from the islands, so we went often to the shops run by islanders.

At first, what I heard neither confirmed nor denied that Rafe was safe, but a general air of regret hung around the conversations, and nothing good of the regent was to be heard. I wondered if Rafe knew this and if he was ready to capitalize on it. I had not reported this news to Baron Otto; thus far, it meant essentially nothing to the overall planning for defense and possible aggression. I reported what

I heard of raids, of course, and most of these reports were confirmed by official dispatches. We all knew Adaintire was in real danger from the raiders, and its closeness to the northern coastline made its fate all the more important to us. Hoping for good news regarding the islands' defenses, which up to now had seemed strong, everyone was listening for reports from Adaintire.

One morning, the linen shops had produced only old news from any of the islands. I had taken up the habit of "resting" for a part of the morning's shopping time at the outdoor tables of a wine shop near the linen stalls, so after more than an hour of trolling the shops listening for news, I sat down at my usual table and pretended to read a book I had bought at one of the stalls nearby. What I really did was listen for any tidbit of information that I could relate to Baron Otto. I had previously picked up some information in the wine shop about Ruska, so this was not completely useless.

As I sat pretending to read, several customers came and went. After perhaps half an hour, two men—one a seaman, the other apparently a woodcutter—took a table near mine. I discerned that the craftsman lived here in Undine; the other man was a relation of the craftsman, an officer on one of the trading ships that transported goods between the islands and the coastline. At first, their conversation concerned the danger of commercial shipping with the raiders ravaging the islands and increasingly patrolling the waters between the islands and the continent.

"We're safe enough, so long as the regent pays his dues to Ruska," the officer said, "and so long as Hogarth pays the regent."

"Hogarth's naught but a pirate, anyway."

"Oh, he's no pirate now—not enough nerve or agility left to attack a ship in open waters has Captain Hogarth. Smuggler and scavenger, aye. But he's done well with the regent in power, so he can afford to keep up the trade."

"Old Drew would have hung his hide to dry if he'd ever caught Hogarth."

"No doubt he would have. I can tell you this, I'd be glad to see old Drew back again, or his ghost even. It's bad on the island, no doubt o' that."

"I heard the boy's held prisoner now in the same castle with his mother, poor mad soul that she is," the woodcarver said, shaking his head. "Except he's held in the dungeon."

"The regent's tale is that he was caught trying to harm his own mother," the seaman said.

"I don't believe it for a minute." The woodcarver shook his head. "Sure the regent wants the throne, and he'll do anything he can to get it. They say he tortures the boy the more because he stole the Coronation Cup."

"Aye, that's likely so, or he'd have crowned himself when first he sent the boy away, most think. They say he's trying to make a deal with Ruska, if the blackguard will allow him to rule the islands as his vassal."

The woodcarver snorted. "Seems to me it's not the MacHanlans who are mad if that's true."

"Aye, I've thought the same thing more than once since old Drew died."

"Aye. Well, pray God the boy's as canny as old Drew. He's going to be on his own getting free, given the way the raids are increasin'. The other kings have got their hands full just dealin' with what Ruska's doin' along the coastline," said the woodcarver.

The seaman lowered his voice even further. "There's them would be more than willin' to help the boy," he said softly, "if ever he got out o' the castle."

The woodcarver lowered his voice as well; I had to strain to hear them both now. "I don't doubt that, but gettin' him out is the tricky part. Not one local's been in the castle in a dozen years."

"That's too true, but they're short-handed there. Every foreigner who could book a passage has left the island. Hogarth's lot have done well chargin' for bringin' folk off the island. Too bad the boy didn't



know they were all pirates when he tried to arrange a ship to bring her off. That's how he got caught."

"He tried to bring her off the island?"

"Meant to do, but the blackguard he dealt with for a ship went to Hogarth, who went to the regent. They let the boy sneak into the castle before they seized him."

"I told ye Hogarth's naught but a pirate, Lukas. Why are ye workin' for him? You used to be an honest fisherman."

"I have my reasons," said the seaman.

"Aye, but are they good ones?"

"We'll soon see, cousin. We'll soon see indeed."

I had heard enough to horrify me; I kept my face as sulky as possible as I left the wine shop and strolled down the street to the shop I had seen Lady Kunigunde and Nualla enter minutes before. I went slowly because I needed time to think. This news about Rafe was worse than any I had allowed myself to imagine, but it was not news Baron Otto could respond to in any way other than regret. He had neither the men nor the means to mount a rescue effort. If anyone was going to save Rafe, it would have to be me. I didn't know how I was going to manage yet, but manage I would, or die trying.

I met Lady Kunigunde and Nualla coming out of the shop and responded to the hurried "Anything?" with a shrug and a shake of my head.

"We may as well go then," Lady Kunigunde said, as I had hoped she would. I had formed a kind of plan for getting to Adaintire, but I would have to reconnoiter without her along. I even considered leaving Nualla out of the scheme, but someone needed to know where I was going and why, just in case I didn't make it back. It wouldn't be fair to Father to have me vanish once again with no explanation of my destination or my plans. I could trust Nualla to keep my confidence and to understand; I knew she would rush to save Ruegen if he were the one in danger.



“You want to do *what?*” Nualla exclaimed when I told her my plan for reaching Adainttire. “Are you out of your mind, Kate?”

“Possibly so,” I acknowledged, “but I can’t think of any other way to get there, Nualla, and I have to go. Nobody else can, and this may be my only chance. No matter what Rafe’s father believes, I doubt Ruska will let trade go on unassailed once he has Adainttire under his control. This Hogarth’s ship may be the last one even to try for Undine, much less to try for home once it’s here.”

“And you think you can buy passage on the ship of a pirate?”

“Not a pirate now, Nualla. A legitimate merchant shipman working under the protection of the regent.”

She frowned at me. “Once a pirate, always a pirate, Kate. That is not just a saying; it is absolutely true. He might take you on board, but who can say he would not deliver you up to Rafe’s father, and then you would be a hostage for Rafe’s compliance in his plan, whatever it is.”

I have to admit I had not considered that possibility in my desperation to somehow reach Rafe. I turned and stared out my window for a long moment. “Nualla, what choice do I have?”

“I do not wish you to do this at all, Kate,” she said quietly, “but I know that you will anyway. Take me with you if you must go. We will find a way.”

“No.” I said. “It’s out of the question. At a pinch, I can pass for an islander. You can’t. There are no native dwarfs on the islands, and you don’t speak the language all that well. Besides, I don’t have time to write Father a letter explaining what I am doing. I need you to cover my absence and explain to Father if-if something prevents me doing so. Please, Nualla, do this for me.”

She met my eyes for a long moment, then nodded. “All right, Kate. I do understand. But you cannot persuade a pirate—all right, merchant shipman—to give you passage on his ship. You will have to stow away on board.”

“Stow away? It’s more likely I could book passage.”

"I do not believe so. Do you know where the ship is docked?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Put on your boy's clothing, then, and be sure to bring your harp or your lute. Money as well. We will go and see what we can see, and how best to smuggle you aboard this smuggler's ship. I do not like it, Kate, but I will help you all I can."

Dressed as a boy minstrel, I slipped out the side door of the garden with Nualla half an hour later. We made our way cautiously to the wharves and located the only ship from Adaintire by the simple expedient of asking one of the men we met. He directed us to the correct pier with a gruff reply and went on his way toward the nearest tavern.

The ship in question, the *Hedgehog* as the peeling paint proclaimed it, certainly had the look of a pirate ship. Battered and scarred from various encounters with other vessels, the barque had three masts, each with a square sail, striped like those most of the islanders' ships carried. The sails were furled now, of course, but appeared to be striped in gray and faded crimson. Nothing about the ship made it look well-maintained. The peeling paint matched the obvious patching of a hole in the near bulkhead; the newer wood made a raw-looking scar about two feet above the water level.

The crew we could see looked as disreputable as the ship itself. They were loading cargo onto the ship—barrels of flour at the moment. One had apparently been dropped and some flour dumped on the wharf. Rafe had not taught me most of the words we could hear being shouted at the unfortunate men who had dropped the barrel, but no knowledge of the language was needed to know that every word I did not know was profane. More cargo remained to be loaded; there were crates, bags, and bundles piled on the dock.

"Perfect," Nualla nodded. "Come on, we will see if we can get hired to move the lighter items."

"If I don't come back, they'll know I've stowed away," I protested.

“You will not do that now, but you need to know the layout of the ship, especially the hold, if you plan to hide yourself there for the voyage. Come on.”

That made sense, of course. I was lucky to have Nualla helping me; I was so worried about Rafe that my thinking wasn’t all that sharp.

The mate in charge of the loading agreed grudgingly to pay us a pittance to load some of the lighter bundles, just to get it done the sooner, so he and his men could have a chance to go to the tavern one last time before the tide began to run out around dark. The captain wanted to be underway as soon as that happened. Nualla and I grabbed the lighter bundles—apparently sacks of various herbs—and followed the line of men descending to the hold. The work was hot but ultimately rewarding, and for much more than the few coins the mate gave us when the last bundle was stowed below. I had a good idea for a place to hide myself; all I needed was a way to get back on board unnoticed. We left the ship and sauntered up the street out of sight as nonchalantly as we could, then circled back to crouch in the shadow of a sailmaker’s shed and watch the last of the seamen hurry off the ship and into the tavern at the top of the street. Only one man had been left on watch aboard the ship with its now-full hold; one was enough because it was full daylight still and the tavern was within hailing distance if trouble arose.

“How am I going to get on board with him up there?” I mused aloud.

“I will create a diversion to draw him away from watching the gangway. You slip on board as soon as his back is turned and get down to the hold,” Nualla said calmly.

“What are you going to do?” I asked her.

“Leave that to me. Stay here until you see him leave the gangway, then get on board as quickly as you can.”

“Nualla—thank you.” My voice was choked with emotion.

She gave me a quick, hard hug. “The gods protect you, Kate, and bring you safe home again.” Then she was gone, running toward the

ship and up the gangway, where the guard accosted her. I was too far away to hear what she said to him, but she was gesturing toward the forecandle wildly, and he turned and hurried toward that end of the ship, away from my position behind the shed. As soon as his back was turned, I darted out of my cover and up the gangway in my turn, then quickly headed toward the afterdeck access to the hold. I hurried down the short, narrow stair and into the hold. Once inside that now-crowded space, I wriggled myself behind some of the large flour barrels and pulled one of the herb bundles down to cover my feet and another to hide my head. I heard Nualla saying above decks, "I am sure I had it when I came on the ship, good seaman, and my uncle is going to beat me senseless unless I find it . . . Ho! Look, there it is, right by the gangway, under that canvas!"

I had no idea what she had pretended to have lost, but apparently the seaman saw whatever it was and did not find it unlikely the loss of the thing would cause a dwarf to beat a nephew. With many professions of thanks, Nualla left the ship, giving the good seaman all the coins the mate had given her for helping load the ship earlier. Her voice faded, the ship rocked gently at her moorings, and I waited for the sailors to reboard and the tide to turn. I prayed to all the gods I had ever heard of and all the saints I could name that I would reach Adaintire and find Rafe in time. I would not allow myself to think I might already be too late or that I might fail to reach him at all. For now, I had to count being hidden safely under the decks of the *Hedgehog* as a sign that all would be well.



## CHAPTER 27

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Perhaps it was the closeness of my hiding place in the hold combined with the scent of the herbs in the bags that helped to conceal me from any casual observer. I can't say for sure how I managed to fall asleep and miss the departure from the docks of Undine. Whatever the cause, I woke and knew from the motion of the ship—no longer rocking at anchor, but riding the swells of open sea—that we were underway to Adaintire. I had no inkling of the time, of course, and no way of knowing how long we had been at sea, much less when we might make landfall. My stomach was suddenly a knot of nerves. I had no idea what I was heading into; I didn't even know how I was going to get off the ship without being detected as a stowaway, much less how I was going to find Rafe if I *did* get off. I wondered uneasily what Captain Hogarth might do to a stowaway. What little I had heard of him while we helped load the ship had done little to attribute any positive aspects to his character. He was described as loud, abusive, profane, and greedy, and those were only the words I *knew*. The ones Rafe had not taught me were probably even less flattering adjectives or nouns. I was fairly sure he would not be a pleasant person to meet under my circumstances.

The door to the hold had been closed at some point, so there was neither light nor sound from above decks to give me any idea of what was happening there. I wished myself already in Adaintire at least a



thousand times before I actually was there. In the utter darkness of the hold, I had no way of knowing how long I had slept or how long the voyage to Adaintire might last. Eager as I was to arrive on land, I was equally anxious to escape notice somehow.

I felt the motion of the ship change when the rolling sea became calmer water; then there was the sound of chains clanking down the forward boards behind me and the rocking of a ship at anchor. I wondered if I had slept through the night and if we had arrived. I might be discovered at any moment, and I felt both hot and sick at the thought.

When I heard a key rattle in the locked hold door, I was sure I was about to be found and possibly put in chains myself, but the door creaked open quietly and closed again before a flicker of light from a dim lantern was allowed to show. Curious, I peered carefully between the barrels of flour and saw a man—one of the ship's mates to judge from his clothes—prying open one of the large crates near the door. He was in profile to me, and his attention was divided between the crate and the door; he seemed as wary of being discovered here as I was.

When he had pried one end off the crate, he carefully lifted out some packing straw, then a long, flat bundle wrapped in a blanket, I thought. This bundle was wider at one end than the other, and he handled it almost reverently. He laid it carefully on another crate nearby and dug in the one he had opened again. The object he removed this time was a bag that seemed heavy as well.

I wasn't aware of making any sound or movement, but I must have, for he suddenly spun around, hand on his knife, lantern lifted so that the dim beam hit me directly in the eye before I could duck. I realized with a start that this was the mate I had seen in the wine shop with his kinsman, the one who had spoken of Rafe.

He had seen me, of course, so it was no use to pretend he hadn't, though I ducked instinctively, fearing he would throw the knife. Instead, he came across the crowded hold over the tops of the stacked goods.

He moved faster than I would have thought possible to reach me and grab me by the left arm.

“What are ye about, boy?” he hissed at me, an inch from my face.

“I-I-please, sir, don’t kill me! I only wanted to get home.”

“Home? Where were ye, then?”

“Undine, sir, wi’ me uncle. But I miss me mum an’ the littl’uns, an’ I’ve had hardly a decent meal in months. Uncle don’t believe in wastin’ food on ’prentices. I mostly et turnips an’ a few carrots sin’ frost in fall.” I made my voice as whiney as possible; my pale skin would add to the illusion of weakness, I knew. He loosened his grip slightly.

“An’ ye thought to stow away on Cap’n Hogarth’s ship would be safer than stayin’ put in Undine? Boy, ye’ve jumped clear into the fire. If Hogarth finds out ye stole passage on his ship, he’ll pick his teeth wi’ yer bones.”

“Oh, please, sir! Don’t let ’im kill me, sir! I’ll do anythin’ ye say, but let me get off this ship, sir!”

“I’ll get ye off, all right. I’ve my own reasons for doin’ it, mind. Yer under a blood oath to me to say nothin’ o’ what ye seen, ye hear? I’ll find ye if ye say a word to any livin’ soul, even the priest. I’ll slit yer throat and the throat o’ whoever ye tell as well!” His eyes, inches from mine, glittered dangerously.

“I won’t say a word, sir! I swear it by all that’s holy!”

“Then come out of there, an’ quiet about it, an’ follow me up top. Can ye move quiet as a cat?”

“I’ll take off me shoes,” I said, nodding.

“I’ve a boat waitin’ alongside. Can ye climb down a rope?”

“Aye, I can do that.” Thanks to Ruegen, I had acquired that skill as a child, climbing up and down trees in the orchard. Ruegen had not been too good at the ropes the first few times he had tried them in training with Father, so he had wanted lots of practice.

“Then ye’ll go first. When ye get into the boat with the other man there, say ‘onions.’ Can ye remember that?”

“Onions?” I was mystified.

“Aye, and if he don’t answer ‘peas,’ ye’d best jump in the bay and try to get away. Quiet now; don’t make a sound.”

He put out the lantern and eased the door open, listened, then touched my arm. I slid out the door and followed him up on deck, crept to the starboard side, and grasped the rope he put in my hands. The boat was there, below, a dim gray shape. I went down the rope carefully, bracing on the bulkhead of the *Hedgehog*. The man in the boat was holding the end of the rope; he let out a hiss when I reached him. “What the—?”

“Onions,” I said, and he grunted. “Peas. Siddown.” The mate was coming down the rope after me. He carefully stowed both the long, thin bundle and the heavy bag in the bottom of the boat and took the second set of oars. Both men pulled quietly, and the small boat slid away from the ship over almost glassy water.

I could see that the ship rode at anchor in a cove protected on both sides by jutting headlands. Once well away from the hip, I could tell that the masts had been shipped, so that no one from open sea beyond the headlands would see the ship at all. So Hogarth probably was a pirate or a smuggler or both, if he used such hiding techniques. I shuddered in delayed horror at what he might have done had he discovered me stowed away. I wondered too exactly what sort of clandestine operation I had unwittingly become a part of by virtue of being in the hold when the mate came to retrieve whatever he had taken from there.

The men rowed quietly to the near shore; the man who had waited in the boat jumped out and pulled it up onto the sand. The other man signaled me to get out as well, then handed out the bundle and the bag to the man on shore.

“Take the boy,” the mate said to the man. “He can’t stay here. Do what ye think best once yer away an’ hear his tale.”

The man on the strand beside me had taken the long, thin bundle and strapped it to his back, making its contents clear. This was a sword, certainly. The other bag he slung over his back as well. It was heavy,

but what it might hold I had no idea. "Tale's the word, I'm sure. Go on, then." And he motioned me to help him push the boat back into the water. As the boat moved away, he pointed toward the cliff. "We go up. Come on."

Once we reached the cliff, he sent me up the steep path first. The path was not difficult to see, but it was not easy to climb without using hands as well as feet. I went as quietly as I could, well aware that any noise here would be audible on the ship. Aware also that the sky was dimming toward dawn, I hurried as much as I could. I knew we had to be out of sight before the light grew wider.

After what felt like hours but couldn't have been, given the little the sky had lightened while we climbed, we reached the top. The man pointed to the left and then led the way, moving fast. I was nearly running to keep up with him when he finally slowed and turned to look at me as he paused by a low stone wall that ran along a lane.

"All right, then. Who are ye, and what're ye doing here?"

"I was only tryin' to get home. Me uncle—"

He glared down a long nose at me, his gray eyes icy. "Ye're no islander, for all ye speak the language. An' I'll be cursed if ye're not a girl as well." He reached out suddenly and snatched off my hat. My long raven braid tumbled down my back. With a grunt of satisfaction, he went on. "Tell me true what yer doing, or I'll use me knife an' leave ye for the crows. I expect that's what Lukas meant me to do wi' ye all along."

"I—the man I love is on this island and in danger," I said. "I wanted to be with him."

"Christ, girl, we're all in danger! Yer man won't thank ye for puttin' yerself in danger as well. What's his name then?"

"He goes by Tomas. He's a harper." I shifted my own harp in its bag over my shoulder.

His face hardened perceptibly. "Tomas the harper, eh?"

"That's right."



"Yer daft, girl. But you'd best come wi' me." So saying, he seized my wrist and pulled me along with him. His legs were considerably longer than my own—he was a tall, rangy man—so that his angry, fast strides required me to trot along at a speed that was far from comfortable and which left me too breathless to ask questions.

His pace was relentless for a good quarter hour. The sky grew perceptibly lighter, yet before full light we reached a small cot with a shed for animals on one side. A rooster crowed lustily from inside it; smoke curling from the chimney proclaimed that someone was up inside. Still holding my wrist in an iron grip, the man wrenched open the door and shoved me inside. I stumbled and caught myself on the table, making it skid somewhat on the stone floor.

Two younger men—in their twenties, I guessed—jumped up from the table. One was short and stocky with dark hair and eyes. The other was tall and thin, with a wisp of reddish-brown beard and a startled look in his hazel eyes. The shorter man's knife seemed to leap into his hand.

The woman at the hearth beyond them said sharply, "Put your knife down, Seamus!" and studied me with her own wide-set hazel eyes. She was of average height and build; her blonde braids were wrapped around her head neatly, and she wore the usual country dress of a chemise topped by a dark skirt and a laced bodice. Her eyes swept me head to toe and back. The hazel eyes widened slightly, then narrowed shrewdly; she shot a glance at the man behind me.

"What's the meanin o' this, Padrig? Where did you get this girl?"

"Lukas found her stowed away in the ship's hold when he went to retrieve the other things. She claims to be lookin' for Tomas the harper. Claims he's the man she loves."

The two younger men exchanged a look of alarm. The one called Seamus reached for his knife again. "A spy, do ye think?"

"Most likely," the man Padrig said.



"Put that knife down, Seamus. And you, Padrig, set down your burdens and open your eyes. Can you not see who this is? Ah, men! Do they not call you Kate, dearie?"

I was startled in my turn but nodded. "Some people do," I agreed. "Including Tomas."

"Aye, he's the one told me so," she smiled. She turned back to the hearth, dipped a bowl of porridge out, and set it on the table. "Sit down and eat, child. You, Neil and Seamus, go tell Finn if he wants his sign, it's here, livin' and breathin' and no doubt willin' to do what she can. Go on, get you both gone. Padrig, sit yourself and eat."

The shorter of the two started to object, but Padrig himself stopped him. "Do as yer mother says, Seamus. Go along, Neil. Don't tell anyone but Finn the girl's here, but tell the others to come tonight." He settled the sword and the bag on the floor beside the door as the two young men went out and came to sit at the table. "Sit down, then, Kate, and eat. I must ha' been blind not to realize—but ye're not what I expected of a highborn lass."

I sat and accepted the porridge; I was famished, having eaten little since breakfast the day before. I had been too keyed up at the noon meal, and then I'd hidden away in the hold. The porridge was just the way I liked it, thick with honey, butter, and cream. The woman sat down beside the man Padrig and smiled at me.

"Men are all daft," she said conversationally to me. "I'd ha' known you anywhere, just from what Tomas told me o' your spirit. I'm Molly O'Daire, dearie, and I was nursemaid at Eilantara when he was born. His own sweet mother was so ill he had to have a wet nurse. My Neil's only a week older than your own Tomas. He was as near my own as any could be. When he was old enough to talk, he called his own mother Mama Fiona and me Mama Molly."

"Is he all right?" My throat was tight from fear of what I might hear.

Molly gave me a sympathetic little smile. "He's in the dungeon at Eilantara Castle, so no, he's far from all right. But he's still alive, at the

least. If he weren't alive, the regent wouldn't keep comin' to question him again and again about that cursed cup!"

"The Coronation Cup?"

"Aye. There's no king makin' on this island without the thing; it's that firmly in the mind o' the nobles. They'd not accept any claim from anyone without it." I glanced at the burdens Padrig had laid by the door, and Molly laughed softly. "Aye, you're quick."

"But I thought it was hidden."

"He took it himself, last summer, and left it with one on the continent he could trust to keep it safe and secret. Not even to you did he tell that, I know. He sent Lukas—that's my cousin, y'see—to fetch it home again."

"But why?"

Padrig answered this. "We need a king, not a regent. Even the nobles are ready to oust the regent before he sells us all to Ruska. Pray God it's not too late already when we manage to get our Rafe out o' the dungeon an' onto the throne as should ha' been done years ago."

## CHAPTER 28

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That it might already be too late was not a thought designed to induce the sleep Molly insisted I take. "The others won't dare come until dark, and you've had a hard night and an early mornin'. Go on up in the loft and sleep awhile, child. The others will want to hear what you know, and you'll want to hear what Finn has to say."

"Who is Finn?" I asked.

"Finn MacGhee. He was harper at the court in Riúilcuan when Rafe was a lad there. He's from the village at the foot o' Eilantara Castle, so he came back here after the old king died. Said he had no heart left for harpin' with the lad gone, the old man dead, and the poor dear princess mad with her troubles. We look to Finn for some way to get Rafe out o' the dungeon. He's been waitin' for a sign—superstitious, he is. But I think he has more than one now. We have three."

"The cup, the sword, and me. Tell me about the sword, Molly.

"Ah, now that's the one Rafe had with him when he came back this summer. Do you not know about it?"

"Yes, of course. The old king, Drew MacHanlan, gave it to my father when he was a boy here in Adaintire, a squire at the king's court with his kinsman from Glasmoire. He gave each of them a sword. Father gave his back to Rafe the night before they left for Undine. He knighted Rafe with it as well."

“Did he, now? Rafe never told us that. Well, anyway, when they caught him at Eilantara, the regent claimed Rafe stole it from the royal treasury, just as he stole the Coronation Cup. But there’s records o’ what’s in the treasury, so he had to get the sword gone before anyone could check to see if it really did come from the treasury. He gave it to old Hogarth and told him to drop it overboard.”

“Which of course he didn’t do.”

“Once a pirate, always a pirate. It’s a valuable weapon at only the cash value of it. O’ course Hogarth wasn’t goin’ to throw it away. Lucky Lukas knew where it was and moved it to his own hidin’ place with the cup.”

“Who had the cup?” I asked.

“The dwarfs did. They made it, ages ago, and gave it as a gift to some MacHanlan that saved a dwarf from the Slavs that were huntin’ him. The chief of the dwarf clan who gifted them with the cup comes to every coronation on Adaintire—has done for hundreds o’ years.”

“How remarkable!” I said. “I think I actually started reading that story just before we had to run from our own Slavs earlier in the summer. We didn’t finish it, and Nualla said it was one she didn’t know from childhood.”

Molly sent me to bed in the cottage loft, and I did sleep; it was near dusk when I woke and came down to the main room for supper with the O’Daire family. Neil and Seamus were relatively silent in my presence, though they did volunteer that the others would be there as soon as it was dark.

They drifted in singly or in pairs until in all about twenty men had assembled in the main room of the cot. Finn MacGhee was the last to arrive. A harper to the core, he made an entrance, pausing just inside the door to be sure every eye in the room was focused on him before he proceeded to the seat of honor by the hearth. Despite his theatrics, he was a tall, distinguished-looking man with neat gray hair and beard, a light step, expressive eyebrows, and still clear blue eyes.

I was sitting on a stool beside Molly on the opposite side of the hearth from Finn's place. Before he sat, he bowed to me. "They say you play the harp," he said. "Perhaps some day I will have the honor of hearing you. But tonight we have other things to discuss."

"The honor will be mine, Finn MacGhee," I replied, "for you, I think, were my teacher's first teacher."

"Indeed I was. And glad I will be to see *him* again. That is what we must decide—how to bring him out of the castle and get him safely away."

"There's never enough o' us to storm the castle, if it has only a single company, Finn," one of the men said. "The place could withstand a siege for months."

"There's never been a question of storming the castle, Michael. We canna risk that, lest they end the effort by slaying the prince and his mother both rather than see them freed."

"They never would!" someone protested.

"I would not venture to say anything is beyond Uaun MacFiorlam now," Finn said gravely. "He was ever a weak man, and weak men given power can turn deadly. He's put us all in danger by daring to offer this Ruska a deal, even if it's a deal, Ruska won't accept."

"Do you think he won't?" Seamus spoke up.

"Never. He doesn't leave anyone he's conquered with any power at all. He wants total control, and leaving behind a native ruler always puts that in danger. Look who's ruling the islands he's taken—some of his Northmen or Slavs. He'd never think of leaving Uaun in control of anything, not even a company of soldiers."

"Then we have to get the prince and the princess out of the castle, and the sooner the better," Padrig said firmly. "How, Finn?"

"That depends," he said, looking at me. "Do they call you Kate?"

"Yes," I answered.

"You stowed away on a ship to reach Adaintire, so no one here will question your courage. Are you willing to do more?"

"Anything it takes."



He nodded. "I thought as much, and you're our best chance of getting someone inside the castle. The local people haven't been allowed to work or stay in the castle in the past dozen years. I've been there a few times, but I'm not particularly welcome, especially now. But they're short of staff, and the poor princess needs watching. If I tell the housekeeper you're a good worker and desperate for a job—why?"

"I was with a merchant family from Wittenbach, but they couldn't book passage for me when they left," I said promptly. "Me being only a servant, after all."

He laughed. "You have the makings of a harper, all right," he said. "That should convince the housekeeper to take you on. Getting news out will be the hardest part."

"Who does go to the castle?" I inquired. "Surely not every need is supplied from within?"

"Well, no—they get food in from the farms every day."

"That's perfect, then. I can easily think of a reason to go see the carters; how about making sure one of the younger, unwed men comes daily, so I can play the part of a girl looking for a husband?"

Finn's eyes sparkled. "You'll do, Kate. You'll do *verra* well."

The rest of the planning had to do with how to hide the escapees when we managed to get them out, so I spent my time with Molly and a couple of the others who had actually lived in the castle, drawing out a rough map that would help me explore the place and, I hoped, get word to Rafe that he was not alone, even if he was in a dungeon.

The next morning, Molly outfitted me in a typical chemise, skirt, and laced bodice, and Finn came to escort me to the housekeeper, Mistress Kennsinger. Finn had already seen her earlier and told my tale. She wasn't a complete fool; she asked me very specific questions that displayed a personal knowledge of Wittenbach.

"Oh yes, ma'am, I once was in the palace with Countess Alfonsine, but I was allergic to the cats. I was sneezing all the time, so I had to

leave her. Then I was with Lady Engelberta for a while as a seamstress, but she didn't like the way I made my feather stitches, so then I took a post with Mistress Hummel and came here." Finn had fortunately supplied the name of a Wittenbacher merchant who had, in fact, fled from the island with his family.

Mistress Kennsinger was satisfied. "You will help Lucinda with Princess Fiona. The girl who was helping ran off a month ago. Finn, I thank you. Come along, Kate. Lucinda hasn't had a minute off all week; she'll be eager to let you help her so she can get a bit of rest."

The Princess Fiona's rooms were in the east wing of the castle, on the second floor. I had feared she might be locked in a tower, but in fact the rooms were large and sunny with comfortable furnishings. I wished as much good could be said of the poor princess herself. She was awake but unresponsive when Lucinda introduced me.

Lucinda, a native of Dansine, was not the person I would have chosen as a companion for a woman not mentally stable. Lucinda was fluttery and pitying. Her thin face reflected her dismay over the princess's state. Her constantly moving hands and her wispy, graying hair floating outside her cap made her look rather like a fluttering moth. I grew nervous just watching her tuck lap rugs and pillows around the princess.

"Oh, if she becomes agitated, give her this tonic, just a half a cup. She's already had one dose of it today, and she really shouldn't have more until after midday. It's a new tonic that the doctor just sent with the regent last week. It does seem to calm her amazingly well."

"We'll be fine, Lucinda," I assured her. "If anything happens I can't handle, I'll send for you at once. Go and have a good rest."

"Oh, I will! I'm so glad you've come!"

I was too; as soon as she was out of the room, I picked up the "tonic" bottle and sniffed, then tasted the stuff. No wonder it calmed the poor princess; it was a wonder she could open her eyes at all. I took the bottle to the garderobe and poured it out, then sent the

little girl who sat outside acting as the runner down to the kitchen for some herbs. "Tell the cook I'm going to make a sleep pillow for the princess," I told the child. I hoped the cook was not aware that the combination I had requested contained nothing at all that would induce sleep, dry or fresh. Many cooks who use herbs for flavoring have little, if any, knowledge of the medicinal values of those herbs, and I hoped the castle's would be one of those.

Apparently, he was totally ignorant of the medical properties of the herbs I had requested, for he sent them up at once with the child. I put on a kettle of water to boil over the fire and was soon steeping a stimulating tea for the princess. She took the first cup without question and drank it down. I gave her a few minutes before offering a second cup. Her eyes were a bit more alert as she drank this. After a few more minutes, she looked at me curiously.

"Who are you? I don't know you."

"No, Your Highness. I'm new. I'm called Kate."

Her eyes suddenly swam in tears. "My baby girl was to be Kate. She died, you know."

"I'm so sorry. You can call me something else if 'Kate' hurts too much."

"What a sweet child you are! No, I will call you Kate, for I would have liked a daughter to be as kind as you. Is there more of that tea?"

"Just a bit, more, aye." I poured the rest in her cup. "Are you hungry, Your Highness?"

"No, not at all, thank you. But you don't have to call me 'Your Highness.' I don't go to court anymore, you know. I never really cared for it much anyway."

"What shall I call you then?"

"Just Fiona. Hardly anyone ever calls me Fiona anymore. Just Uaun, and he hardly ever comes here. We are—happier apart." She looked a bit sad but then smiled sweetly. "But you must be tired of my chattering."

"I'm not a bit. But would you like me to read to you? Or play the harp a bit? I see you have one."

"Oh, I haven't played in years and years. My little boy plays—but he's hardly little now. I do wish he'd come home soon. It must be months since I saw him last."

My throat constricted. She had no concept of time. She might seem perfectly rational for a few minutes, but she was indeed still very ill in her mind. To cover my lack of response, I went and picked up the harp. "This is very like my own," I told her. "It belonged to my mother. I suppose your son has his own now."

"Yes, I suppose so. I don't really know much about what he does on Coir Inis. I know he trains at arms and riding and such, of course, but he loves music, so I hope he has a chance to play some. My father used to say a king who only learned the arts of war was not a very good king for peacetime."

"How very wise he was!" I said, tuning the harp as we continued to talk. After a few minutes, I ran my hand over the strings and nodded at the tuning.

"Sing something cheerful, Kate. No sad songs or long tragic ballads."

"All right. This is a song my teacher made when he was first teaching me on the lute, but later I learned it on the harp as well." I sang "The Three Foolish Princesses" for her, and she laughed merrily.

"Oh, what a good song! Your teacher must be very clever."

"Yes, he is. He can set any words to some tune he knows, he says, but he doesn't write many songs. He did write this one, though." I struck the harp again and sang:

When the shadows of the evening fall,  
When the watches of the night grow long,  
When silver moon and stars shine on all,  
I'll think of you and wish you well;  
I'll carry you always in my heart;  
I'll remember you in my song.



When morning breaks through trails of gray,  
When sunlight dapples all around,  
When rain and wind the forests sway,  
I'll think of you and bless your name;  
I'll cherish all our days together;  
I'll listen for your laughter's sound.

When I grow weary on my way,  
When I lose heart for what I do,  
When I fear to face the day,  
I'll know your strong and steady heart;  
I'll know your door is open still;  
And I'll be turning home to you.

When I stilled the strings again, she gave me a very keen look. "That's a love song if I ever heard one, Kate. Is he your sweetheart, as well as your teacher?"

"Aye." I nodded. "He's the best man in the world to me, Fiona."

"I hope I get to meet him some day, then. He must love you very much, to have written that song."

"Well, he sang it for me the first time I heard it. He was leaving, you see, so I thought it was just for me," I told her. "But I think he really wrote it for someone else as well."

"Oh, surely not."

"Oh, I think so. He may have been thinking of me just then, but he'd been longing to go home for a long time, to see his mother. I think the song was really more for her than for me. And that's fine by me, Fiona. I hope he gets to see her soon. Very, very soon."



## CHAPTER 29

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Lucinda proved to be both a blessing and a bane over the next few days. As a bane, she left me to tend to Fiona almost all the time; I could understand that she was tired of being with the poor woman for days on end with no relief of any sort, and I really did not mind staying with Fiona. Indeed, I could be sure she was not being drugged when I was with her. Lucinda had accepted my story that I had accidentally broken the tonic bottle, but she had simply produced another bottle of it. I had to spend my first night in the castle with Fiona, and my second sneaking into the still room and brewing up something that smelled and tasted similar without being harmful. Lucinda never noticed the substitution, though she did remark after a couple of days that the “tonic” didn’t seem to be as calming as it had at first.

Because of the need to take care of Fiona, one way or another, I didn’t have a chance to explore the castle until my third night there, not even to locate the entrance to the dungeon. What I found did not make me happy; the doorway down to the dungeon opened out of the guardroom itself. This meant that gaining access to the dungeon might involve incapacitating not one but several guards, for they often spent off-duty time in the guardroom, even in the small hours of the night.

The “blessing” side of Lucinda, however, did give me information I could use. She proved to be almost as gossipy as she was fluttery.

She knew everything that happened in the castle, and it was from her that I learned there was indeed a prisoner in the dungeon. The guard captain was doing the duty of jailer as well, and he complained about it to anyone who would listen. Lucinda listened, of course, and she shared what she knew, which proved to be somewhat less than I did.

“Oh, Jacques says he’s surely a terrible thief. He took a sword right out of the royal treasury in Riúilcuan, and he was trying to break in here to steal the princess’s jewels. He’s rude to the regent, when he comes. He stole something else from the treasury—Jacques doesn’t know what—but the regent has questioned and questioned him and gets nothing from the man except profanity. The regent has been here three times in the past month, and that’s more than the whole of last year, so whatever he stole must be very valuable.”

“I’m surprised the regent leaves him here and doesn’t take him to the capital,” I remarked truthfully.

“Oh, well—Jacques told me the regent doesn’t want anyone to know the fellow got into the treasury at all, or others might try the same thing. So he leaves him here. I know he was dreadfully impatient when he was here last. He even made the fellow come and see how pitiful the princess is, to see if he could get the man to show any guilt for trying to take away her things. The regent made me leave the room before he brought the man up, though, so I didn’t see him.”

I passed on to Neil what I learned; I made the excuse that I was sending for special things just for the princess and I had to ask the carter what might be available that the cook hadn’t already called for. I flirted so outrageously with Neil that the whole castle was talking of it. I also passed on that I had a sort of a plan, but it would take a day or two to work out, but that by the end of a week I hoped to get Rafe out of the dungeon and both him and his mother out of the castle.

Fiona herself had been the spark of the plan. She was generous to a fault, always giving people little presents when they came to do any work in her rooms. When I took her out into the garden one day,

she gave the guard who accompanied us a silver penny, telling him, "Use this to buy something for your sweetheart." Inspired, I went that evening to the guardroom with three bottles of good wine.

"The princess wants to thank all the guards for their good care of everyone here," I told the guard on duty. "She sent this wine for all of you to share." The next night I took them a cake the cook had made "at the request of the princess," and on the following night more wine. When I arrived the next night, every off-duty guard was there, as were the ones who had duty at the postern gate nearby. I had counted on that, having remarked that it was unfair for some to get more than others simply because they were on duty. The postern gate was in easy view of the guardroom, so with the door open, they could both watch and drink.

This night's gift was the best yet, as far as they were concerned—good whiskey from the regent's private stock. It was, of course, the best from my point of view as well; the whiskey effectively covered the taste of the drug I had put in it, and the alcohol made it hit the bloodstream quickly. Inside half an hour, I crossed the room and calmly took the keys to the dungeon from the snoring captain's belt and his sword from its scabbard. I had brought a lantern when I crossed the courtyard to the guardroom, so I carried it in one hand with the keys, the sword in the other, just in case there was someone down the steps to guard the prisoner.

As dungeons go, this one was not all that bad. It consisted of a few small cells which were relatively dry and, so far as I could tell, free of rats and other vermin. Rafe was in the second one I looked in, lying on a pile of moderately clean straw. He appeared to be sleeping, and he wore shackles but seemed relatively unharmed otherwise. I thought he was cleaner in the dungeon than he had been when I first encountered him in the Dark Forest, but I did have to admit it was darker in the dungeon, so perhaps the dirt didn't show as much.

He was keeping his eyes resolutely closed as I opened the door, though I was fairly certain I had caught a gleam of eyeball when I first

looked in. I hung the lantern on a hook and stood for a full minute just looking down at him. He did not stir.

"Well, are you content to stay here, Rafe darlin', or would you care to wake up and get out o' this place?" I deliberately mimicked his lilting brogue as I knelt to fit the key into the shackles.

His eyes and mouth popped open at the same instant as he sat bolt upright.

"Kate! God in Heaven, what're you *doin'* here?"

"As I think you phrased it a few months back, 'rescuin' you, o' course.'" I got the lock on the shackles open, fortunately in time to keep him from wrapping me in chains as he flung his arms around me.

"Dear God, you *are* real! I thought you were a dream o' my fevered brain."

"Your brain's not fevered, nor your body, either. Let me go, Rafe. There'll be time for that after we get out of this place. Come on, I've given the guards a sleeping potion in their whiskey, but the ones coming off duty in a bit will raise an alarm. I brought a sword for you."

"Remind me to kiss your feet sometime in the future," he said as he kissed my forehead instead. "I'm more than ready to leave this place, but I'm not leavin' the castle without my mother."

"Understood and accepted," I answered as we reached the guardroom. Not a single guard moved as we went through, including those supposed to be at the postern gate. "It's best if you wait at the gate there. I'll bring your mother along in a bit. She won't know you, Rafe; can you handle that?"

"I'll have to. I want her off this island before Ruska gets here."

"I'll be as quick as I can."

I had put Fiona to bed myself, telling her that we were going to go out and listen to the nightingale if it came to the garden that night. She had accepted this and gone to bed in her clothes. I told Lucinda the princess had just been too tired to put on a nightgown, and she had



accepted *that*, too. I'd counted on Lucinda following her usual routine of having a glass or two of wine after Fiona was sleeping; apparently she had done so, for she was dead to the world.

Fiona was awake, however. She sat up happily when I touched her shoulder. "Is the nightingale in the garden?" she asked.

"Even better, Fiona. You wanted to meet my sweetheart; he's here, but he can't stay in the castle. He's gong to take us down to Finn McGhee's house and sing for you there. Won't that be nice? You remember Finn?"

"The harper, of course. That will be fun."

"Good then. We have to be very quiet, though. We don't want to wake anyone and get Tomas in trouble for coming here in the night."

"Oh no. I'll be quiet."

We made our way to the postern gate, and I saw that Rafe had changed clothes, putting on a guard's cleaner shirt and jerkin instead of his own. He had washed his face as well; his beard was still damp. "Tomas, this is Fiona, Princess of Adaintire. Fiona, this is Tomas the harper, my teacher and my sweetheart," I introduced them formally.

"He's a very nice-looking young man," she said to me. "You remind me of my brother," she told him, "though he was younger and had no beard. Are we going to Finn's now?"

"It's my honor to meet you, Princess Fiona," Rafe managed, looking at me for a cue. At my nod, he continued, "And yes, we'll go down to Finn's now."

"Remember we have to be very quiet, Fiona," I told her. "We'll sing when we get to Finn's."

The village wasn't large; the trip required about fifteen minutes, but it seemed much longer because the castle loomed above us, guards on the battlements doing rounds. I listened for an alarm that did not come, fortunately, before we reached Finn's door. He opened it silently at my knock; no light showed from inside as he drew us all in.



"My candle went out, Princess," he told Fiona when she mentioned the darkness. "I was about to light another." And he did so. "You are looking very well, Princess. And you, Tomas, my old student. I'm glad to see your recent occupation has not done you much harm."

"I'm glad to be quit of it, though," Rafe told him.

"We should have some wine to celebrate, Finn," I told him as he led Fiona to a chair. "And I promised we'd sing, didn't I, Fiona?"

"Yes. I should like to hear Tomas sing the one about the evening shadows. It's a beautiful song."

Rafe gave me a stricken look as he accepted the harp Finn handed him. "Sing it with me, Kate?"

"You start, and I'll join in on the last verse," I answered, taking the wine Finn had poured for Fiona. I let both Finn and Rafe see that I was adding a sleeping potion to it.

Rafe began the song and managed to get through the first two verses and a bridge; I sang with him on the last verse. Fiona drank the wine I had given her and was asleep before the song ended, so she didn't see Rafe wipe away his tears when the song ended. "How did you know, Kate, that I wrote it for her as well as you?"

"I just did," I told him. "Are we leaving, Finn?"

"Aye, Seamus is here with the wagon. Carry your mother out, Rafe. Lukas has his boat riding at anchor for us in the cove. We need to be well away from the town by the time the castle is roused." He took the harp Rafe handed him and picked up another as well—mine, I knew. We all left the house, again dark, and climbed into the wagon Seamus drove. Half an hour after leaving the castle, we were out of the town on our way to the cove.

Fortunately, the cove was nearer the town than to Molly and Padrig's cot. Rafe and Finn carried Fiona down the steep trail to the strand, where Lukas and Neil waited in a boat. Altogether, I suppose not much more than an hour had passed since we had left the castle, but once we reached the single-masted fishing vessel, I was suddenly as exhausted as if I had run all the way with hounds snapping at my heels.

I followed Rafe to the single cabin where he laid his mother gently on one of the bunks and tucked a blanket around her as carefully as if she were likely to break from a touch. His eyes were still haunted as he turned to me.

I put my arms around him. "It'll be—better, Rafe. She may never heal entirely, but it'll be better."

"I know." He swallowed hard to master his emotions. "You're a miracle, Kate. If I hadn't already loved you before this night, I would now. Where are we goin', anyway?"

"Undine. Lukas learned the light codes Hogarth uses to signal the raiders. Your father really is dealing with Ruska, Rafe."

"Aye, I found out that much before they caught me and locked me up. That's why I was trying to get Mother off the island."

"Apparently, there are developments at Undine regarding an offensive. Lukas will tell you all about it. I'm sorry to say I'm too tired to come listen myself."

"You've had a busy night, darlin'," he laughed softly. "You stay here with Mother and get some sleep. Me, I want fresh air and no walls closed about me for a while."

"I understand. Go on, then; be a man among men. Kiss me first though."

"Now that I can do," he smiled and proved it, for quite some time.

## CHAPTER 30

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We reached Undine the following morning just as the cathedral bells rang the end of early Mass. To my very great surprise, Father stood on the dock waiting for us, along with Ruegen, Nualla, and my Uncle Escanor of Wittenbach. Father embraced me warmly, almost the first time he had ever done so in public.

He also embraced Rafe.

"I am so very glad to see you, children. And," he said, bowing deeply, "to welcome Princess Fiona to Undine as well. King Ursel has deputized me to greet you, Highness. Do you remember me as a boy at your father's court? My name is Wilhelm."

"Yes, of course!" she beamed. "You and your kinsman from Glasmoire, and Dafydd from Thiarcladach were all together, weren't you?"

"Exactly so, Highness. They are here as well. They were quite jealous that I won the honor of escorting you to the palace," he smiled. "There is a carriage for you and the other ladies."

As he helped me into the carriage, I asked, "When did you get back to Undine, Father?"

"Two days after you departed," he replied, giving me a very direct look. "I was not too pleased to find you had gone haring off again." Then he smiled. "But I do understand why you did, and I am overjoyed to see you back again, and Rafe with you."

I introduced Nualla to Fiona as she joined us in the carnage. “Nualla is my very great friend, Fiona. She is the niece of the chieftain of the Grenzlerin dwarf clan.”

“Oh, I know that clan! Or, well, I know the name. A chieftain’s son centuries ago gave one of my ancestors a lovely cup that is used in the coronation of our kings. You must come and visit us on Adaintire, Nualla, and see it one day.”

“I hope to do so, Highness. When this war is over and peace comes to all of us again, I will certainly come to visit you.” She reached into her pocket and drew out my christening medallion. “This is yours, Kate. Torgas gave it to me for safe keeping.”

“How did he get it?” I asked.

“It came with a fisherman named Lukas, I understand. It was used as his authority to retrieve something of value that he was holding for—”

“For Tomas,” I finished. “Of course. When did Ruegen get here?”

“He and Torgas arrived two days ago, with the King of Dansine. We are moved to the palace, Kate. Baron Otto is apparently the most respected diplomat on the continent; he knows everyone. You have never seen so many kings and princes and admirals. Every one of the kings who has a navy of any sort is here, as well as several from landlocked nations. Forngal is here with three other dwarf chieftains and almost four thousand dwarfs. The plains around the city are crawling with ground troops, and every port along the coast is teeming with ships, Ruegen says.”

I turned to Fiona, who was listening avidly. “There is a great fleet of raiders, the Northmen, threatening to invade all the Island Kingdoms and already occupying some of them, Fiona. That’s why we had to come away. Tomas explained it all to me last night after you fell asleep at Finn’s. They took us to the fishing boat, and we slipped away in the dark.”

“Oh, it all sounds very exciting—but so dangerous.”

“We will be safe in the palace,” Nualla assured her. “Lady Kunigunde has made sure all of us have comfortable rooms.”

“Who is she?” Fiona asked.

“She was my governess,” I explained, “and is now my great friend.”

That lady was waiting for us at the palace, to take us to our rooms. “You are wanted at the council,” she told me. “I will keep Princess Fiona company while you go and report what you learned on the island. You’d better change clothes, though. Those look like you slept in them.”

“Probably because I did,” I laughed. “Fiona, I’ll come back directly I’ve told what I know.”

Nualla went with me to help me find my clothes, which had been hung away by one of the servants. She seemed unusually happy in light of what was going on.

“You know me well,” she said when I commented. “Forngal has given Ruegen and me permission to be betrothed when the war is over. We cannot be wed for a year after the betrothal, but it is a beginning.”

“Congratulations! I’m happy for you. Right now, all I want is for this war to be over and Rafe alive and well.”

“I’m more confident now than before of our winning. Are you ready? We should go.”

The council was being held in the great hall, the only chamber in the palace large enough to seat everyone who was there. I had never seen so many kings and princes assembled in one place before. Rafe sat among the kings from the islands; all except Scathoithiar and Coir Inis were represented. Father had saved me a seat with him and Uncle Escanor among the seven kings with ports on the Central Sea. With King Ursel of Undine sat kings of four more kingdoms with northern coastal ports. The King of Dansine sat with three more kings and princes from eastern countries and with the four dwarf chieftains whose main concern was to contain the Slavs in their eastern lands so they could not join in the destruction of the northern coastal kingdoms.



Various people, including Rafe and I, were called on to report what we knew of the situation on the various islands, and Baron Otto was asked to sum up the intelligence about Ruska himself.

“He’s a nobody who wants to deny the fact that he has no right to any power whatsoever. His origins lie in the north somewhere, but he resembles the unknown Slav that fathered him. He grew up in obscurity, never content to apply his obvious intelligence to any useful pursuit but always meddling in affairs that didn’t concern him and working hard to irritate those he considered his intellectual inferiors. Since he grew to manhood, he has served in one court or another, always managing to have someone else blamed for whatever trouble he managed to create before he left. Some five years or so ago, he attached himself to the strongest of the northern tribes and began urging them to coordinate their raids on the islands in an effort to conquer them entirely and so have a base for attacking the continent at will. He models himself on one of the legendary heroes of the Northmen, who conquered the entire known world in the legends. He quite simply wants to rule the world.”

“He’s mad, then!” exclaimed Uncle Escanor. “One country is quite enough to rule; you couldn’t give me a second one.” To that there was general agreement, at least verbally. I did see a few suspicious glances exchanged between some of the rulers of countries that were traditionally known to make war on one another over borders or treaties.

“Our individual differences must be put aside for the duration of this war,” King Ursel said. “Our concern is to rout this Ruska from the islands so they are free, and so he cannot use them as a base for further campaigns against any one of us here. We are prepared to float 587 ships in an armada to beat this devil on the sea and to land as many men as we have on the islands. Where do we strike first?”

Dafydd of Thiarcladach stood. “Adainntire is the key island, Ursel. It lies closest to the northern coast of the continent and is the southern gateway to all the interisland waterways. If we can control Adainntire, we control the islands.” He looked at Rafe solemnly. “The regent

has almost sold us all by trying to treat with Ruska. Will Adaintire support us or the regent?"

Rafe stood slowly. "I cannot say what the nobility will do, Majesty. I believe the ordinary people would rally to the name of the MacHanlan for the sake of memory alone. Rumor has it that some of the nobility grow weary of the regent's maneuvering, but I am wary to trust too much to them, for none spoke for me at the time my father named me exile and outlaw. They know me no better now than then, and they know also that the regent's blood runs in my veins as well as that of the MacHanlans. What further misdeeds may have been reported of me I don't know, so I can't say that I am your best choice of leader for Adaintire."

A grave man in the deep green mantle that proclaimed him King of Glasmoire stood. "The MacHanlan is the *only* choice of leader for Adaintire, young man. None of them spoke for you before, it is true, but they have had time to rue the day they allowed Uaun MacFiorlam to usurp your throne in all ways but wearing the crown himself. They will come with shameful faces, but they will come nonetheless, and fight the harder to assuage their own shame."

The rest of the council meeting turned into a vast strategy session, with kings, admirals, and generals making plans to coordinate their navies and armies so that all of the islands would be so well protected that Ruska would have to face them on Adaintire. Nualla and I slipped out and found Lady Kunigunde and Princess Fiona in the small garden outside our rooms. Nualla and Lady Kunigunde went off together to see to supplies of medicine for the different surgeons to take along. Fiona and I walked a while in the garden before returning to her room and sitting on the divan.

"All this talk of war is frightening," she said. "Will your Tomas fight as well? He looks like a soldier as well as a harper."

"Yes," I told her. "He'll be going too."

"He'll be all right, Kate. He's a good man."

"Yes, I know, but good men get hurt too. Maybe the good men get hurt more than the bad ones."

“Did he get to see his mother?” she asked. “You hoped he would.”

“Yes, he did.”

“I’m glad for him. I wish I could see my little son.”

Rafe and I walked in the garden that evening after dinner. “I wish there was something I could do, Rafe,” I told him. “I feel so useless being left here. I’m not even spying this time.”

He laughed softly at me. “Well, just don’t be stowin’ away on any more ships for a while. I’ll let you know when it’s safe to come back to the island.”

“All right,” I agreed. “Be sure you do, or I’ll have to swim, if I’m not to stow away on a ship to get there.”

“I believe you’d try it, too, darlin’,” he laughed, then said seriously, “There is one thing you can do, Kate.”

“What? Don’t say work a tapestry, or I’ll do you an injury.”

He laughed again. “No, but you can take care o’ Mother. However this turns out, it’s goin’ to be hard on her. If she even realizes.” There was pain in his voice.

“She may realize more than we know, Rafe. She lost so much in so short a time—her mother, her beloved brother, her babies, her father, even you, in a sense. Her mind tried to protect her from any more hurt. And the doctors kept giving her various drugs to make her forget her pain, and making her forget everything else as well.”

“I know, and I really do try not to take it so personally, but I just remember her callin’ me by someone else’s name whenever I would come home from Coir Inis to see her. My mother didn’t know me, and my father didn’t want me on the same island with him. That’s how it felt, and I have a hard time gettin’ past that and realizin’ she at least didn’t hurt me on purpose.”

“She didn’t. She loves to talk about you, as you were when you were a child. It just may take a while for her to realize you’re the same person as the boy she loves and longs to see.”

He slipped his arms around me and pulled me close. "I hate to leave you here, Kate, but I'd hate it worse if you came and got hurt. I don't know what might happen on the island. The nobility may not want me as a king."

"I think they will," I assured him. "If they don't, then we'll run away together and live in the forest."

"Eatin' nuts and berries?" he teased.

"Sleeping in a tree like birds." I nodded.

"Ah, well then. I wouldn't mind, so long as you're there as well."

I was absolutely truthful as I answered him, "Neither would I."

The fishing boat that had brought us to Undine slipped away the following night as the tide turned. Three other boats went with it; aboard were some thirty dwarfs and men from Kurtzheim, for Torgus and Ruegen were going with Rafe. All that I know of what happened once they left I got from them later, mostly from Ruegen in fact, because Rafe had difficulty talking about many of the events.

"Lukas knew how to get through the perimeter ships of the raiders," Ruegen told me, "so we slid into the cove under cover of darkness and went ashore as quietly as possible. Almost as soon as we topped that cliff, we ran right into a big troop of men, and we all thought we were caught and would have to fight then and there. But then up came this one man, asking for Rafe, and it was Neil O'Daire."

"We're here to help make ye a king, Rafe," Neil had said. "An' there's twenty more waitin' in the town."

"So instead of thirty men, we had about eighty to the twenty holding the castle at Eilantara, and basically we just marched in without a lot of fighting at all. Then Rafe sent out summons to the nobles he thought might support him, and we waited for a couple of days to see if anyone would come.

"Rafe and I were up on the wall over the gate when one of the men in the highest watchtower called down that there were men approaching, a well-formed and impressively large troop of foot and



horse, from the direction of Riúilcuan. We thought this was bound to be Rafe's father, but Rafe insisted on staying on the battlements anyway, to speak with whomever it was.

"Shortly three noblemen came riding up to the gate and stopped just below, none of them, Rafe said, among the ones he had sent to tell he was on the island seeking support to help beat off the Northmen."

"You'd be the MacHanlan," the front rider had said to Rafe.

"I am Rafe MacHanlan," Rafe had answered. "What is your intention, my Lord of Loughlin?" He had recognized the device on the man's shield.

"I've come to do what I should ha' done seven years past, my prince, and stand beside ye, if ye'll have me. I've two hundred men to put in the field, sixty mounted and the rest afoot."

Rafe could barely speak, Ruegen told me. "He just nodded at first, then he called to the men to open the gate for the riders, and we went down into the courtyard. All three riders got down and knelt to Rafe, right there. The other two had smaller forces, but they put them at Rafe's disposal as well. By the end of the day, there were nearly a thousand men camped on the plains outside the town, and more than a dozen noblemen who had all come and knelt to Rafe and acknowledged him as their rightful prince and future king. More and more men kept arriving all the next day, so that by the time the regent arrived, there were close to two thousand against the paltry hundred he'd brought to retake the castle. They caught him like a fly in honey and brought him to the castle for a trial, for treason in trying to treat with Ruska."

"If we tried him for exilin' you, my prince," MacLoughlin had told Rafe, "we'd all of us have to hang with him, for we let him do it. We should ha' known better, and we've lived to regret our silence then. Ye've chosen to forgive us, and we must therefore forgive him. But this business with Ruska is another matter. It may get us all killed."

The trial went pretty much as might be expected, except that Rafe stood up and asked the nobles to reconsider the sentence of death at the hands of an executioner.



"I beg you, my lords, give him a sword and a horse and a place in the line of battle. He's brought us all to this pass, and he should repay at least in part by fighting alongside us. If he survives the battle, I recommend perpetual exile from this island, on pain of death. But if he dies in battle, as is possible for all of us alike, I would see him given a fitting burial on his home island at Coir Inis, as I hope any who fall will rest among their own kin."

"Rafe was a lot more generous than I could have been, considering what that man did to him," Ruegen said. "There's no touch of the regent about Rafe, Kate."

"And yet he did die bravely enough," I said. "Rafe was right about him. He told me his father wasn't always evil, just weak."

Ruegen snorted. "Weak indeed! I suppose Rafe told the barest of truth about his death to Fiona."

"He died in battle, in the front lines, according to Rafe's letter."

"Aye, true enough, but he left out the part about the regent being so drunk he could hardly stand when we put him on his horse."

"Ah. Well, yes, he did leave that part out."

"It's just as well. The churl hurt her enough without her having to know he died trying to flee the battle."

I had read Rafe's letter to Fiona. Her hand had trembled so when I gave it to her, saying "It's from your son, Fiona. It's about Uaun" that she had shaken her head and pushed it back at me.

"You must read it to me, Kate, if you can read Rafe's script. It's notoriously messy."

"It seems to have improved a bit," I told her, taking the letter.

"Dearest Mother," he had written, "I wanted you to know that I, at least, am well. The island is safe from the raiders, and Ruska seems to have fled for now. Many of the kings are here on the island now as we ready our efforts to free the rest of the Island Kingdoms from the tyrant and turn them back over to their rightful lords."

"I regret that I must tell you that you are a widow. Father rode in the first wave of cavalry defending the capital from the forces of the

Northmen and Ruska's allies, the Slavs. I was behind in the second wave to beat back those who escaped the first defenders. I saw Father fall but couldn't reach him across the field. The standard bearer, Jonlin, told me later that Father tried to fight even after an axe had given him a deadly blow that made his life bleed out on the field."

Fiona wiped away tears as I hugged her. Then she sat up straight and lifted her chin. "Rafe is a king now. I must have a new dress for the coronation. Do you suppose I might have purple instead of solid black, just for the one day?"

"You can have any color you want, Fiona," I told her. "I don't think Rafe will mind a bit, and I will personally decapitate anyone else who says a word."

## CHAPTER 31

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Now, logically, the coronation of my prince as a king should, by the formula of the “happily ever after” story, be followed immediately by our wedding, Ruska’s quick defeat, and Fiona’s complete recovery, right? That, of course, is the trouble with such stories; they seldom if ever reflect reality. In fact, “happily ever after” almost never happens in real life. There are good days and bad days, and without the bad, one sometimes fails to appreciate the good.

Rafe’s coronation was pretty much the culmination of the war for control of the islands. Ruska himself, though, had fled long before the Northmen were ready to give up the foothold they had gained on the three islands, so the fighting went on for several weeks after Adaintire was secure. When it was deemed safe, Fiona and I sailed with Baron Otto, Lady Kunigunde, and Nualla to Ríúilcuan and stayed at the castle there. Rafe was not in residence at the time, for he was much involved in the effort to evict the last of the raiders from the islands and was off with Father and the other kings.

Having been so long isolated from the people of her own country, even though she had lived there continually until a few months past, Fiona was somewhat overwhelmed to be back at the royal castle and to find herself so much cherished by the people of Adaintire. Molly O’Daire was one of the first people to present herself to Fiona.

“Highness, I’m so glad you’ve come back safe to us. We’ve all fallen in love with your Rafe now he’s a man, just as we were when he was a little lad tagging after one or the other of us. He’s so very like your dear brother you’ll be that surprised.”

“Is he? I know they favored one another as children, but I have wondered if he’s much changed. Will I know him, then?”

“Oh, aye, you will. Kate—or should I say Highness to you as well?—you look to be blooming, and no surprise there. It’s a grand thing you’ve done, bringing our own princess back to us, and Rafe as well.”

I had wondered how I was going to explain to Fiona that her Rafe and ‘my Tomas’ were one and the same; Molly’s comment made it seem imperative that I do so at once. Fiona herself asked the opening question.

“I wonder what Molly could mean, that you brought Rafe back to them all? Did you and Tomas have something to do with Rafe coming home at last, as you did with helping me reach Undine safely?”

I nodded. “You know, Fiona, you noticed that Tomas resembled your brother that night you met him. Do you remember?”

“Yes. He looked a great deal like Tomas, but older, of course. My brother was only fifteen when he died.”

“You remember too that you told me that time seemed to move oddly at times—sometimes rushing by and sometimes dragging?”

“Well, yes—it’s like Molly saying Neil is grown up now. I know he must be, if she says so, but I can’t imagine it.”

“But Rafe and Neil are the same age, Fiona. Your Rafe is grown up too.”

“Yes, but I can hardly imagine it.”

“It’s true, though. Rafe has been involved in the effort to free Adaintire from Ruska all along, and in order to move around undetected, he used a different name. Do you recall his full name, Fiona?”

“Of course, I do. I know the names all my children should have had. Rafe is named Andrew for my father, Rafael for my grandfather, Daniel for Uian’s father, and Tomas for my brother—oh no! You can’t mean that your Tomas—” Tears welled in her eyes as the truth dawned on her. “I didn’t even recognize my own son! How could I not know him?”

“You hadn’t seen him for a long time, Fiona. That wasn’t your fault, and he knows that. He loves you, Fiona. Ever since I met him, he’s told me over and over how much he hated your illness that robbed you of knowing your own family. He’s so very glad you’re better, Fiona. He can hardly wait to see you again now that you’re able to remember a bit more.”

Fiona *is* getting better at remembering events from one day to the next; she still has trouble sometimes recalling when in the past things happened, but mostly she remembers who the people she sees every day are, and that she saw them yesterday and the day before as well. I was not present for her and Rafe’s first meeting when he finally returned from Scathoithiar. He was nervous about seeing Fiona alone, but I refused to go with him.

“This is something you have to do, Rafe. You and she have a lot of hurts to heal between you. Be patient. Just love who she is now and tell her you do. It may take a long time to be completely right, but you have to start today and on your own.”

With the end of the scouring of the islands, everyone wanted to see Rafe properly crowned and settled into his rightful place. The coronation was attended by all of the allied kings and dwarf chieftains, as well as by as many of the people of Adaintire as could crowd into the cathedral at Riúilcuan. The troublesome Coronation Cup made its appearance in the hands of Forngal, who renewed the gift as a token of continued friendship between the Grenzlerin and the line of the MacHanlans. Forngal added a prayer for the blessing of Rafe’s kingship from the All Father and All Mother of the dwarfs to the long litany of saints whose



blessings had already been invoked by the archbishop and several other priests. After speaking and signing his oath of duty, Rafe took Communion, drinking from the Coronation Cup to seal his kingship. At Rafe's specific request, Father placed the crown of Adaintire on his head, after which Rafe received the formal fealty of the nobles of the island. Though he had told Father that he personally considered that unnecessary as he'd already had ample evidence of their loyalty and willingness to support him, Father reminded him that all those people wanted a part in the coronation and that he would have been churlish to deny them the opportunity to acknowledge him publically as their king.

I'd like to report that our marriage followed at once, but unfortunately or not, it didn't. Ruska had escaped justice at the hands of the kings, but no one was willing just to let him go. Father and the other kings departed with most of the foreign troops, and Rafe meanwhile, like the other island kings, had his hands full trying to rebuild the defenses of Adaintire. He was gone from the royal residence more than he was there as he traveled from one part of the island to another setting up defensive strategies with the various lords of each coastal area. Some of the dwarfs stayed to help rebuild sea walls and other defensive structures that had been damaged in the fighting, but most of the work had to be done by the people of the island. They were very willing to do the work, for the damage to the defensive structures had left the island too vulnerable to their traditional enemies, the pirates like Hogarth.

The old saying "once a pirate, always a pirate" proved to be all too true. When the death of the regent had ended his lucrative "legitimate" business of delivering goods between the continent and the islands, Hogarth and his cronies had reverted to their old ways. The Northmen had been gone only a few weeks when there was news of a raid on the eastern side of Adaintire.

"Not the Northmen again!" Rafe had exclaimed in consternation.

“Oh no, Majesty,” the squire sent by the local lord of the attacked town said. “It was Hogarth the pirate. We all know his ship even in the darkest night, and Hogarth himself was seen. Back to his old trade, he is. My lord says you’ll have to be dealin’ with Hogarth, Majesty, before the year’s out and probably long after.”

I stayed with Fiona even after Father, Ruegen, and Baron Otto departed for home, where Caledonia’s complicity with the nefarious Count Grzljnzki still remained to be settled. Father asked me to provide a deposition rather than make the long trip home and back again. Given the evidence against her, Caledonia got off lightly; Father requested and was granted a decree of divorcement and banished her back to Dansine, where her half-brother the king dealt with her more harshly than ever Father would have done. She was sent to live in an isolated convent and required to attend all the offices of the holy sisters and say prayers for all the people who had suffered due to the ambitions of the Slavs to sweep across the continent.

For months, the elusive and apparently unscathed Ruska kept popping up all over the place, like a bad penny. He proved to be as slippery as an eel for a long time, disappearing just as someone was closing in on him, only to turn up again in some location far removed from the previous one. Little plots and conspiracies seemed to spring up everywhere he surfaced, until at last one of his own underlings, it is said, made sure a hired assassin knew just where to find Ruska on a certain night. That the night happened to be Lannas Night and the place happened to have a reputation as a meeting place for practitioners of one of the darker forms of the Old Religion did not escape notice when Ruska himself was found there the next morning, his body sprawled on the rude altar with his throat cut and arcane signs carved on his chest and forehead. His shoulder-length black hair had been singed by fire. His contempt for everyone, even those he allowed to become his cronies and hangers-on, had turned back on him, it seemed. The assassin allegedly reported that he had never

touched Ruska and that while he watched in horror from a place of concealment, the participants in whatever ritual took place had chosen Ruska as the appropriate sacrifice themselves. According to the assassin, Ruska had not died willingly, but fighting and cursing them all. After Ruska's death, though, the Northmen retreated from their attacks on the islands and the continent, the Slavs returned to fighting among themselves, and the rest of us were able to get on with our lives at last.

As I finish this narrative of the events leading up to what I really hope will be "happily ever after" for Rafe and me, the final preparations for our wedding are taking place under the efficient supervision of Lady Kunigunde von Kurtzheim; she and Baron Otto were married quietly last spring. Nualla and Ruegen were formally betrothed on Midsummer Eve at the Grenzlerin Chieftain's seat; they will be married there next summer but are here now with us for our own wedding. They arrived with Escanor and Schwanhilde of Wittenbach and, unfortunately but inevitably, it seems, the Bertas, all still looking for husbands. Rafe was extremely disappointed; he had intended to sing "The Three Foolish Princesses" during the wedding feast but has agreed somewhat reluctantly that it would not do to be rude to our guests.

Also on the ship with them from Wittenbach came a wedding present from Great-Aunt Alfonsine, who did not come herself because all the cats could not be safely left to their own devices for so long lest they take over the entire castle and refuse to let the king and queen back in when they go home. Nualla carried the wedding present to my room in a wicker basket. Obscene and threatening sounds issued from the basket until the lid was removed and the occupant proved not to be a howling demon but a small white kitten named Painblanc, a descendent of the famous Moufflette. The kitten has decided to allow me to share the bed with her at night; I don't know how she will react to sharing with Rafe as well, since her first reaction to him was to arch her back and somehow become three

times her size with every hair on end. Rafe is threatening to feed her to the hounds if she hisses at him one more time. The kitten seems to like Fiona, however, so perhaps she will agree to sleep in her apartment rather than ours.

Like most men, Rafe is tired of the fussing over the wedding plans. He suggested the other day that we just find the nearest priest and say our vows in private. Another suggestion was that we could just elope and go live in the Dark Forest with Ulf to fetch and carry for us. He isn't really serious about any of these suggestions; he invents them to make me laugh and quit fretting so much over details.

"We're going to be married, darlin', whether the cake is seven layers or ten, and whether or not the pages wear blue hose and black tunics or blue tunics and black hose. Does all this fuss really matter?"

I know he's right, and I shouldn't be such a Berta about the details, but I don't plan to do this ever again, and I know if Maman were alive, she would revel in the details. She would be happy to know that I am giving her as large a part as any of my living relatives—larger, in fact. I didn't even attempt making a wedding dress or having one made for me; I'm wearing the one she made for herself, and it fits me perfectly. I'm wearing her jewels as well, the same ones I carried around in my boots three years ago while rambling around in the Dark Forest with a ragged man, being frightened out of my wits most of the time.

He's back again, asking me for about the hundredth time what in the world I am writing. I don't intend to tell him; he thinks the widespread story of my supposed adventures is amusing and has even written a song about it that, unfortunately, has become very popular. I want to keep this record of the true story for those hypothetical children. With any luck at all, they'll be sensible people who will not believe all the fantastic stories they hear and who won't want to run off to have adventures of their own. But I don't plan to hold my breath on either possibility. As for Rafe and me, if "happily ever



after” turns out to be dull, boring stuff, there are still the pirates. They should provide some entertainment, even if I have to stow away on old Hogarth’s ship again and let Rafe rescue *me* next time. If my score keeping is accurate, it’s his turn anyway.



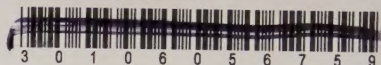
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efarious plots, daring rescues, epic battles, fabulous balls, a jealous stepmother, a ragged outlaw, an evil dwarf, eccentric relatives, a charming minstrel, a drill-sergeant governess, gypsies, pirates! Who had rather listen to "happily ever after" than to the real story? *Snow White*, who prefers to be called *Kate*, relates her true adventures, which encompass all of these and more as well. Along the way, she encounters both friends and foes, falls in love, and through all of it keeps her sense of humor. *Kate* may be a princess, but she's also a girl with a mind of her own and the determination to take care of her own destiny.



Linda Richardson began reading at four and writing at 12 and never stopped either one. After completing an undergraduate degree, Linda started teaching, so at retirement in 2011, she has spent more than 50 years in classrooms and libraries as a student and teacher—mainly of English at all levels from elementary through college.

Her interest in fantasy as a genre blossomed in college and especially graduate school, when she completed a master's thesis on the works of Katherine Kurtz. Many years later the

Internet put Linda in touch with other fans of the Deryni world, leading to a collaborative fan fiction novelette called *Derry's Wedding*. Having completed one long work, she decided to tackle others, and so *The True Adventures of Snow White* came to be. In addition to writing and still reading, Linda likes photography, traveling, using the Internet to connect to old friends, and spending time with the latest in a long line of housecats, though like *Kate*, she prefers "one or two at a time, not a whole pride en masse."

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